

Consider Jesus

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- [0 : 0 0] In Anthony Doerr's World War II-era novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, one of the main characters, a young French girl named Marie-Laurée LeBlanc, loses her sight at age six. So she has to relearn how to do all the things she was used to doing without her physical vision. To help Marie-Laurée learn how to do things without her sight, her father builds a small-scale model of her Parisian neighborhood and teaches her to trace streets, buildings, parks, and trees with her fingertips. Then he takes her into their real neighborhood while she holds onto his arm and asks her questions. How many steps to the baker? Do you smell the bread? What do you hear when you sit in the park and you listen? He trains her to rely on her other senses until she's confident without physical sight. This passage in Hebrews that we heard this morning does something similar for us. These words and stories about Old Testament saints train us.
- [1 : 1 3] They show us how to walk by faith, how to learn new ways of seeing, and they point us towards what our ultimate goal is. We'll explore three questions about faith together. Father, what is faith? Who is the object of our faith? And how do we have faith, especially in the midst of hardship? Would you pray with me? Father, thank you so much for the joy of worshiping as a gathered family together. We pray that you would be our teacher this morning. Not my words, but your words, Lord. Would our hearts be soft? And would you pour your spirit out on us? In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. So first of all, what is faith? Hebrews 11, 1 and 2 defines faith as confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
- [2 : 1 5] This definition of faith sounds good, but most of the time we want to hang on to things we can see and things we know for sure. Things like our relationships, our jobs, our talents, our abilities, the things we do at school. And none of these things are bad things, right? And when things are going well in our lives, we might even think we don't need the kind of faith that the author of Hebrews talks about. Even if we don't mean to, we sort of treat God like one of those safety tools, you know, in the glass box. Break glass in case of emergency. And that's pretty different from the daily joyful life of faith the author of Hebrews teaches us about here. He knows life is going to get hard. So he weaves two main themes throughout his letter to help us hang on to that confidence, hope, and assurance that he talks about in his definition of faith. So the first theme is this, persevere. When suffering comes, don't give up. The original recipients of this letter dealt with all the same daily struggles we do.
- [3 : 3 0] And they also faced imprisonment, torture, and death because of their faith. Living with this day in and day out, how did they persevere?

That brings us to the second theme, which is that Jesus is the fulfillment of everything in the Old Testament. The kind of perseverance the author of Hebrews talks about, this isn't the kind of perseverance that's about trying harder.

It's about looking at Jesus. These Old Testament heroes all point to Jesus. The author combines these themes, perseverance, and fulfillment with stories of Old Testament saints to give us visible models of an invisible concept like faith.

This leads us to our second question. Who is the object of our faith? All the people we read about in this passage were praised for their faith.

By pointing to these examples, the author makes a bold claim. We can have assurance of things, even when we can't see them. One of the things you might have noticed when the group read this passage is that each section started with the two words, by faith, by faith, by faith, repeated over and over.

[4 : 54] The author uses this repetition to say, hey, all these people did this. So that means you can be part of this too. It's possible. Sometimes we need to know something is possible, don't we?

Let me give you a more recent example. A few years ago, the long-awaited sequel to the 80s classic Top Gun came out. In Top Gun Maverick, the Navy calls their best and brightest fighter pilots to California to train and be deployed on a secret mission.

And I don't even remember what the mission was, but it doesn't really matter. So Maverick is teaching them. And when they're in the classroom with Maverick, he's using a simulator to explain the mission to them.

And as they watch on the simulator, the students start to look at one another and shake their head. They say, there is no way we're going to be able to do this.

We don't have time. We're probably not going to be able to fly out of this canyon without running into the side of it. And not only do they think the mission's not possible, but they also realize if they attempt it, they're going to die.

[6 : 09] So this is where they are. Until Maverick gets in a jet and flies the simulated course perfectly, showing them that it's possible, proving that it can be done.

Like Maverick, these Old Testament heroes help show us that it's possible to live a life of faith. That it's possible to persevere even in the face of overwhelming difficulty and pain.

Verses 13 to 16 say, they did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. How did they keep going?

Two reasons. They were called by the living God. God began to work in them. And their encounter with the God of the universe left them fundamentally changed.

They realized they were foreigners and strangers. Some translations say exiles. On earth. The visible world around them. The cultural values they were familiar with weren't meant to provide stability, success, and comfort.

[7 : 20] They realized this world wasn't their home. And they began longing for a better country. A heavenly one. As we sang a moment ago, they loved their Lord so dear, so dear.

And his love made them strong. They walked forward in hope. Not in their own strength, but in the strength of God's love. Still, even though many of these heroes had wonderful qualities, courage, perseverance, faith, we're not putting our faith in them.

Only one person can truly be the object of our faith. Jesus Christ the righteous. The people we read about this morning are like signposts that point us to the Lord Jesus Christ.

They're not the goal. Christ is. What all of these saints started, Jesus finished and perfected. The word that we translate as pioneer is *archegos* in the Greek.

And that word is used to describe a person who is the first in a long procession. Who shows the way for many others to follow. Who is the leader of a movement.

[8 : 39] And doesn't just stop once they reach their destination. But continues as the conquering hero once the city is established. What the author of Hebrews is saying here is that by their lives and faith, each of these saints give us partial glimpses of the archegos.

Jesus Christ. Let me give you a few examples. Abraham obeyed God's call to leave his homeland of Ur and walk towards Canaan.

Noah built an ark at God's command.

Jesus built the true ark, his church. And in a moment, we're going to do a baptism and welcome Michael Chan into the ark of Christ's church. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who would later become the father of the nation of Israel.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, the one who extends the offer of salvation to all nations. Now, unlike the pilots in Top Gun, who were the best and the brightest, most of the people in this passage were pretty unlikely heroes.

[9 : 58] They had faith, but massive failings for the most part. So why doesn't the author of Hebrews talk about this? Is this one of those selected biographies where the author doesn't really tell the truth?

No. The truest thing about each of these people is that Christ Jesus completed the good work that God began in them. Friends, will he not do the same for us?

So how do we live this life of faith? We can do what they did. Light them. We can listen to God's call.

We can believe that God is trustworthy. And we can say yes to God. Three simple steps. But steps that often mean danger, hardship, and pain.

Knowing that, how do we persevere? Church, we consider Jesus, who persevered through more opposition, scorn, and suffering than we ever will.

[11 : 03] We consider Jesus, who showed us what was possible by taking on our human nature, but without sin. Who ran the race first.

And who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame. And what was the joy set before him? The joy set before him is us.

It's you. It's me. It's all those who have gone before us and those who will come after us. His joy is the redemption of the world from sin and death.

And the healing of our broken humanity so that we can reign with him forever and ever. He scorned the shame of the cross because of the unspeakable, eternal weight of glory to come.

Because of Jesus, we can fix our eyes on that beautiful heavenly city that he has prepared for us. Where, as the book of Revelation says, he will dwell with us and we will dwell with him.

[12 : 09] Where we will fall before his throne crying out, worthy is the lamb that was slain. Where we will need no light because Christ himself will be our light.

Where all the suffering we've endured and all the tears we've shed will be wiped away. And as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, we shall see face to face and know fully, even as we are fully known.

I want to leave you with a few questions as we close our time together. For those of us who are Christians, if we're struggling with those three steps of faith, to listen, to believe, to say yes, is there a weight that Christ is calling us to throw aside or to set down?

Is there sin entangling us or shackling us that he wants to free us from so that we can persevere and run the race we're called to? Another way we could ask this is to say, is there something distracting us from running the race with perseverance?

Are we fixing our eyes on something or someone other than Jesus? There's a reason that three out of the four offices in the book of Common Prayer include time for confession.

[13 : 34] Friends, spiritual renewal always begins with repentance. What if both individually and as a church, we committed to a season of confession and repentance from now until the end of the year?

Notice that the author of Hebrews says, let us throw off everything that hinders. Let us fix our eyes. We're not meant to do this alone.

One of the great gifts of being in community is inviting one another into our joys and struggles, to rejoice and lament together, to persevere and to fix our eyes on Jesus together.

Secondly, when we lay things aside, when we confess sin, or when we give God something that we've had clenched in our hands, what might he want to give us?

We can trust that God, who gave up his own son for our redemption, is faithful to forgive us from all unrighteousness. His love is lavish.

[14 : 47] Will he not graciously give us all things? We've talked about the joy to come of reigning with Jesus in the heavenly city, but he has not left us without comfort and joy today in this life.

He has given us his spirit to guide us, to comfort us, and to lead us in truth. The Holy Spirit will fill every space we're willing to give him.

If you're not a Christian, and if all of this is new, my invitation for you is two words. Consider Jesus.

And if this sermon is stirring anything in you, I would love to talk more with you about joining in this race of faith. We want you to run with us. This idea of running a race as a metaphor for faith is one we see through much of the New Testament.

And it's one I've meditated a lot on in my own life as a runner for the past 30 years or so. But it started, I really started to think about it when I was running cross-country in high school. So one of the differences between cross-country and other types of racing, if you're not familiar with it, is that most of the time with cross-country, you're on uneven, unpaved ground.

[16 : 06] You have rocks and ditches and tree roots to contend with. So the natural thing is to look down so that you avoid tripping. And yet, I remember when I would race, I would run by my parents and other spectators, and they would say, eyes up.

Strange, isn't it? But they knew that looking down was actually more dangerous than tripping. Looking down meant I could get distracted and veer off course and completely miss the finish line.

Here's the thing, church. When we're tempted by sin, when we're tired, when we're suffering, or when we're weighed down with distraction, remember, we are surrounded by the cloud of witnesses, the saints who have gone before us and finished their races, cheering for us and saying, eyes up.

Like Marie LeRae feeling the model of her neighborhood, night after night, and learning a new way of seeing, we have stories and scripture and sacraments to help us persevere, to help us run the race and truly see.

And we get to run with one another. Every single one of you matters. All of us matter. Jesus is calling all of us. Whether you're big, whether you're small, old, young, he's calling us.

[17 : 43] It's a long race though. We'll have to run through some dark valleys. We might stumble and fall. And we might grow weary and lose heart.

But when that happens, and when we do fall, we won't be cast long, headlong, as the psalmist says, but the Lord himself will bear us up.

Jesus, the archegos, who has called us to run this race, who ran the race first and made it possible by his death and resurrection for us to finish, will come to us in the dark valley.

He'll pull us to our feet, take us in his arms, lift our chins, and say, don't be afraid. I'm not far off.

I'm right here. Eyes up, beloved. Would you pray with me? Lord Jesus, would we fix our eyes on you, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith?

[18 : 53] Lord, thank you that you make things possible and that you are with us forever and ever, even to the end of the age. We pray these things in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.