

# Voices from the past

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading of this morning. Deeply encouraging and that indeed is the theme of this morning.! It's about encouragement and voices from the past.

! I'm going to do this in two sections. I want to speak from this passage to begin with. We'll then have a break. We'll sing a song and then I want to read to you something more particular.

Our need of encouragement. Do you need encouragement? That's absolutely right. We all need encouragement. Christians need encouragement.

It is no spiritual statement to suggest that somehow or other you do not need encouragement.

Every Christian needs encouragement. They always have done.

And much of the New Testament writings, interestingly, are aimed at giving encouragement. If first century people needed this, how much do 21st century people need it?

[ 1 : 05 ] If you're a Christian living in this city, living in Brighton or living in the UK, the Christian tide is out.

Historic respect has turned in a remarkably short space of time to ignorance and ridicule. The recent debate on same-sex marriage is a clear demonstration that most people have jettisoned Christian culture and have no interest in the teaching of the Bible.

If you're a Bible-believing Christian, how does that make you feel? Confused? Frustrated? Questioning?

Discouraged? You're not alone. God's people in every age have felt like this at some, perhaps many points in their lives. But most have clearly found a way to carry on in spite of their circumstances and feelings.

Hebrews chapter 11 gives us brief and telling insights into the lives of people who lived over a period of several thousand years. People who the writer calls ancients or perhaps better ancestors.

[ 2 : 16 ] These are our spiritual ancestors. Seventeen are named here, men and women, but there were plenty more, unnamed but just as significant.

What links all of them is that they showed by their actions that they were people of faith. Twenty-six times in this chapter the word faith is used. They are all commended for their faith.

But this is not an anything-you-like-to-believe faith, but something with content and definition. It's said of Moses in verse 26 that he regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

He kept the Passover. He obeyed the words of God. And these people kept making life choices which were unlikely, risky, downright stupid, as far as the people around them were concerned. Think of Noah, who on God's command built an ark, and it says that his faith condemned the world. His action appeared ridiculous.

[ 3 : 29 ] They even gave their lives for their faith. All of them realized that this life isn't all there is. No, they saw that this life is the short time that Moses knew about when he was thinking of comparing the pleasures of Egypt with being identified with the people of God.

They were all looking forward to another time. A time of reward. A better country. Something better that God has planned for all who trust him. And this is where chapter 11 takes us.

And if we heard nothing more, we might draw our own conclusions and make our own responses.

So is this just about nostalgia? Is this just about nostalgia?

A better time. The giants of the faith of the past. Good to think of those times. And all of us could do likewise if we've been Christians for any length of time.

We can look back upon better days in some ways. And is this just an exercise in nostalgia? I think not. Or is this an exercise in national pride?

[ 4 : 41 ] Because you'll notice that most of the people here were Jewish. Or became Jewish, like Rahab. So is this just a kind of a flag-waving exercise to say how proud we can be because we belong to this particular line of people?

This ethnic group. Well again, I think the Bible doesn't encourage us to think in that way at all. Or is this something that we can just take note of these lives?

Because after all, we have many lives reflected here. And there are lessons to be learned from their lives. And indeed there are. Because most of these people made mistakes. In some cases they made very big mistakes in their lives.

And yet we see how the Lord took them out of their mistakes. Well that would be true. But it's actually not the particular application that the writer of the Hebrews makes.

Because we're hardly given time to take breath when we launch into chapter 12 and verses 1 to 3. And here they are up on the screen, although I read them to you.

[ 5 : 41 ] So he says here, therefore. So therefore we realize there's a link between what he's already said. And he's saying, here's a consequence of what I've been telling you.

This is the application that we need to make. Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him 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 sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. The writer transports us from the history book to the athletic stadium, and the stadium is full.

Like the London Olympic Stadium 12 months ago, that Katie and I had the privilege of attending, and which you would have all seen on your screens if you were turning the television on last night, because there's a weekend of kind of anniversary games going on in the very same stadium.

[ 6 : 57 ] Tier upon tier, row upon row, there are eager and expectant observers. But unlike the Olympic Stadium, they are not just members of the public come to be entertained.

No, they are the athletes of another and earlier age, each with their stories to tell, each with a remembrance of what it cost to be involved in the race of life, rich with personal experience. Remarkably, they are all there wearing the scars of their battles. And they're all there. Yes, even those from thousands of years past.

And here we are, not there, seated in the stands, but down on the running track. They've run their race, and now it's our moment. We have a race to run, and it's a tough race.

We want to run well, but we're doubtful, and we have plenty of reasons to be discouraged. We're carrying injuries. We'd hoped to be running alongside a friend or family member, but they've dropped out for some puzzling reason.

[ 8 : 10 ] Last night in the men's 100 metres, lane four next to Ursain Bolt was empty, and perhaps there are a lot of empty lanes next to us. Then strangely, there appear to be a lot of people in the stadium who aren't helping.

They're distracting us, and they're not really interested in what we're trying to do. They're fooling around, creating disturbance, enjoying themselves, but not helping us. And the weather's not helping.

It's windy and begun to rain. It's pleasant to run in mild, dry weather, but not when the weather changes. Maybe it'd be better to walk away now rather than make a fool of yourself. There are other runners.

One less won't matter. But then you can just about hear Abraham's voice. Yes, it's a strange thing, isn't it, that as Christian people, we know it's Abraham's voice, and we can hear him up in the stands.

And then Joseph, and Moses, and Rahab, and there's Abel, one of the sons of Adam and Eve, one of the oldest voices of all.

[ 9 : 19 ] And the writer says of him that he's long dead, but he's still speaking. He still has something important to tell us about living the life of faith, and so do they all.

And they're not distracting us. They're seriously engaged. They're right behind you, and you're remembering the races they run and how they reach the finishing line, but not just them.

Those are the well-known ones, but they're just a handful of those. After all, how many people of faith are actually named in the Bible? Possibly a few hundred. But there are a multitude in this stadium who, like them, are people of faith.

They've run their races. They've reached the finishing line. Now they fill the stadium with their presence, with their history, and the vivid and personal encouragement of their lives. This is the great cloud of witnesses.

They remind us that we are not alone. We look around, and there are not so many of us, are there? We're in a minority, especially in this city, an odd minority, but then we hear the voices from the past, and we realize that the reality is that we are part of an increasing number, a quantity that is so great that it is beyond numbering from every age and every land, and that encourages us.

[10:49] We're actually living life in the midst of a home crowd, and that's a big advantage to you when you're running a race. The Amex Stadium gears up into life again.

I think there was a match last night, and they'll be coming again, and I was at the cricket on Friday, and it was great to be amongst a whole load of Sussex supporters. It's hard work if you're in an away team situation, and all around you are people cheering for the other team, but we're actually, as Christian people, surrounded by those who are rooting for us, who are saying, come on, well done, you're on the right track.

If they did it by God's grace and help, then by the grace and help of the same God they trusted, so can I. They each ran a race.

It was the same race we all have to run, but in another way, it was a very particular and personal race, and so is ours. Your problems and pressures aren't mine, and vice versa.

There's a race which is marked out for us. It was and is a race and was not a ramble. There is a difference.

[12:08] It's a serious, it's not recreational. It's not a fun run. So the writer says, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

We each had to learn and take action to stop things getting in the way of their being genuine Christians. Yes, there is actually something to give up, something to stop doing, something to say no to if you're going to be a Christian who is worthy of the name of Christ.

It's a strange aberration that we've somehow accepted the idea that true Christianity is living like everyone else does with a bit of spirituality added in. They also remind us that we need to be serious about getting rid of sin habits in our lives.

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. They took particular encouragement from the earthly life of Jesus.

That was their biggest encouragement and the thing that kept them going. When they looked at Jesus they couldn't help being encouraged. Many of them couldn't see him as clearly as we ought to be able to but they saw him well enough and they noticed that the very things he expects of people who are called by his name are the very things that he did so brilliantly and beautifully well.

[13:37] Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. He ran the race that was set before him. Yes from all eternity he was getting ready and one day he came leaving heaven's glory because he couldn't run his race with the glory of heaven wrapped around him and steadily and solidly and determinedly in his words thoughts and prayers choosing to do exactly what his father asked him to do even to the willing acceptance of a terrible death.

all of that being worth it for the joy that was set before him. What an encouragement. Our forerunner didn't take a shortcut to glory but waded through personal opposition and intense suffering for our sakes and his glory.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. We all need to hear this. Some of us have been in this race for a very long time but actually it is a short time.

Some have just begun. Welcome. Welcome a thousand times. We're so glad we're running with you. But there are some here who've not started and some who've started and then drifted off the track sitting beside the track becalmed or stuck and I encourage you to read the stories of these men and women of faith and don't hold back.

Take the first step back into the Christian race. Join in. Let Jesus take you by the hand and live life in his presence and with his help. We're going to sing a song and then I want to introduce you to the story of one person of faith.

[15:22] So I'd like to encourage you to know more about the lives of other Christians and to do so whilst Hebrews 11 gives us some well-known examples of people of faith actually most of the

people of Hebrews 11 aren't named.

If you look at the latter part of Hebrews from verse 33 to the end you'll see there's lots and lots of stories there and some of them have Bible echoes to them but some of them just aren't in the Bible in that same way.

Have you ever heard of someone being sawn in two in the Bible? Have you ever heard in the Old Testament of women in the plural receiving their dead back to life again?

That's one woman I can think of. It was that woman who Elijah stayed with. Her son was brought back to death but women it says women receive their life their dead back to life again.

Jeers and flogging chain put in prison they were stoned put to death by the sword lots of people in sheepskins and goatskins wandering around unnamed lots of people there and I think what it tells us is that we don't have to restrict our thinking about believers to Bible stories.

[16:45] In fact most Bible stories are quite short. Many people we don't know much about their lives at all. How much can you tell me about Barak Jephthah?

Well there's a bit there's a bit but do you know much about Barak's mummy and daddy? Do you know if he had children? Do you know what he liked to do what his hobbies were?

Do you know how he spent his time? Well of course the Bible gives us sort of big big issues in these people's lives. It sort of puts a finger on certain points in their lives and we learn the lessons from those particular points but in terms of words and pages there isn't a great deal connected with some of these Bible people here but interestingly as we come more into the modern age there's a lot more that we can learn about Christians who have lived their lives before us which can be of enormous benefit to us because as we read their stories we can find methods and issues of identification which we may find hard it's hard for us to identify with Abel isn't it?

I think so what do you know about Abel? He lived a very very very long time ago and he made a sacrifice which was great but that's all we know about him and he probably lived hundreds and hundreds of years because people did in those days but we don't know anything sorry he didn't did he?

He got killed by Cain I'm sorry complete mess up there so he died young but I'm saying the people who lived around that time they actually lived a long time but we don't know much about their lives we should get to know the stories of other Christians and the particular stories that we can identify with in some way people who knew our culture that's helpful or at least an earlier version of it people who spoke a language that we can understand some people who were alive not thousands of years ago but maybe a hundred years ago or so so I want to encourage you to read a book like this which is called A Fistful of Heroes and I'll encourage you to read it because it's got 31 stories in here in less than 300 pages so it's an excellent thing for reading on the 5B or late at night when you tend to fall asleep after page 4 or 5 or so because you can read it in two nights in that way and it's extremely well written and because it's my birthday

[19:27] I've got a load of extra books down the front here which I am giving away free but if you want to give some money at all you can do so to the church building fund because we're going to need lots of it that is the measure of my concern that we should get to know some of these people of the past and there's one particular man I want to introduce you this morning who I didn't know much about at all until I read this story but here he is don't worry about the word sir in the front there just think of him as George has anybody come across this man before George Williams 1821 to 1905 no that's good so I'm going to introduce you to somebody this morning who has had a profound influence upon our nation and I hope that will whet your appetite so bear with me as I read this and hopefully enjoy it's fascinating to trace the worldwide growth of the young men's

Christian association ah does that ring a bell YMCA from a remark made by a 22 year old draper's assistant draper's they were the ones who clothes old fashioned word for clothing he made a remark to a friend as they walked across Blackfriars Bridge one Sunday evening in the early summer of 1844 Blackfriars Bridge is one of the old bridges of London so our American friends if you're going to London you too may walk across Blackfriars Bridge and stand exactly where George Williams stood on this day when in 1844 the draper's assistant George Williams had come up some two and a half years earlier from the West Country and had found a post in a Ludgate Hill shop Ludgate Hill is very near St Paul's Cathedral Charles Dickens had been faithfully picturing that part of the city in his new book

Oliver Twist a dirtier and more wretched place he had never seen wrote Dickens of one of the Warrens behind St Paul's the street was very narrow and muddy and the air impregnated with filthy

odours the sole places that seemed to prosper amid the general blight of the place were the public houses covered ways and yards which here and there diverged from the main street disclosed little knots of houses where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in filth shop assistants bound by convention to black coats and white ties were never far away in feeling or in fact from the slums behind the buildings where they slept ate and worked hours were long in a draper's shop 14 being usual in summer boys and youths were herded in dormitories and horseplay and obscenity would often rain unchecked they could be dismissed at a moment's notice and unless a man's luck was in the sack could lead straight to the slums in many businesses sharp practice was commended by promotion and since there was little opportunity for any amusement except in the nearby clusters of taverns private morals were often on a par with public thus a well-meaning young man who started behind the counter in the 1840s might be forced by sheer pressure of his surroundings to discard high ideals and sink to the easy-going dissatisfied existence of the average run of his fellows

George Williams however entering messers hitchcock and Rogers in 1841 did not sink not only did he work his way honestly into the confidence of his employer but he succeeded both in resisting temptations and in helping others to do the same from his achievement sprang the YMCA behind it lay an experience four years earlier the country farm near Dulverton anyone been to Dulverton Exmoor lovely part of the world that's where he was born and gave him nothing but a strong constitution the draper shop in Bridgewater where he was apprenticed gave him something more he was 14 when he began there he was small in size but he made up for it by a quick wit and breezy efficiency he was honest but no plaster saint yet before he left Bridgewater for London God helped me to yield myself wholly to him wouldn't it be great to see 14 year old saying something like that the draper was a dissenter in other words he wasn't a member of the established church he belonged to a dissenting organisation like the

Baptists or the Methodists and he obliged his boys to attend chapel resentful at first young Williams owed both his immense fortune and his fame to this clause in the indentures for in course of time the minister's preaching showed him a boy of 16 that in life there is an upward and a downward road he saw that he was himself heading downward although outwardly as good as his fellows if not better he began to search for a way of escape and in the winter of 1837 he found it they told me in this very town of Bridgewater how to escape he said many years later confess your sins accept Christ trust in him yield your heart to the saviour this he did returning one night after sermon time he knelt down at the back of the empty shop I cannot describe to you the joy and the peace which flowed into my soul when first I saw that the Lord Jesus had died for my sins and that they were all forgiven what to others might be an empty phrase were to

[ 25 : 34 ] George solid experience when eventually he left for London he had tested and proved his faith by reading and prayer he had been grounded in truth and experience and had learned to love others for Christ's sake it was therefore a strong-willed young man who started work at Ludgate Hill in 1841 but the will was not his own oh Lord wilt thou keep me and preserve me to the end guide my judgment and keep me in the right way was the theme of the constant prayers he scrawled across his diary he made an immediate success of his work his story has an unavoidable touch of Hilaire Belloc's Charles Fortescue who always did what was right and thus accumulated an immense fortune and was soon promoted he worked hard and was scrupulous in business deals all along he sought to be of service to others since he believed he had a message of which they were in desperate need he not only helped them in their jobs but tried to bring the thoughts of the most frivolous down to earth and up to heaven he was however popular high spirits went with high ideals and he lacked any trace of the prig his Sundays he spent slumming visiting in the

St. Giles' Rookeries that's in the sort of garrets and the lofts of the poor places teaching in ragged schools and Sunday schools ragged schools and Sunday schools they were the first official schools in the country before it was law for children to go to school and going twice in the day to hear a famous non-conformist divine meanwhile he was educating himself in music and literature that I may be better able to work with Christ I like that phrase that thought he's going to educate himself because I want to work better with Christ the core of his life was prayer and companionship with Christ what ought I to do he once asked in his diary constantly repose on God he prayed more for others than for himself and as a result longed to win them for Christ he would write the names of his fellow assistants in his diary and would add let me plead with thee until I prevail when he joined the firm there was one other Christian among the 140 assistants within two years the number was over

20 nearly all the result on the human level of

George Williams prayers example and personal approach it wasn't an easy time the normal stress of long hours and hard work were added the strains peculiar to a young and lonely Christian but temptations were slowly overcome his character developed molded by his deep desire to glorify him and what is more by 1844 he had seen a transformation in his shop regular meetings for prayer were held Bible readings and services took place and Mr. Hitchcock head of the firm who appeared all along to have a slumbering faith became as active as any George Williams had for a while an ambition to be a foreign missionary friends however persuaded him to throw this overboard and devote himself to the mission field of his trade in May 1844 the idea came to him that something ought to be done in the other large shops Teddy are you prepared to make a sacrifice for Christ he asked his fellow assistant Beaumont that Sunday evening as they walked across Blackfriars Bridge to Chapel he then outlined his plan for a few earnest devoted self-denying men to pray and work their way together the idea grew they found that the manager of another shop and their own employer were equally in favour so on the 6th of June 12 of them met in Williams bedroom in the shop buildings to form a society their aim was simple to spread the Redeemer's kingdom amongst those by whom they are surrounded they went a step at a time they hired a room in a nearby coffee house and drafted a letter which was sent to every drapery business in the city various clumsy names were suggested for the new association and that finally chosen was not always used at first but the movement caught on lonely Christians in other shops working behind the counters or as clerks in the offices upstairs or as buyers like Williams himself found encouragement and companionship by November having moved its place of meeting to a hotel in Blackfriars which however forbade the singing of hymns they had about 150 members within a year of the talk on the bridge the young men's

Christian association had a paid secretary a regular program and a steadily increasing following they met weekly at first the meetings were not open or restricted to prayer and the exchange of news soon they were open to everybody of any trade and whatever his views and talks and Bible readings were given God was there his blessings filled the place said one of the first members some years afterwards as he described with the enthusiasm of reminiscence souls renewed backsliders reclaimed evil prevented weak brethren strengthened friendships made the whole movement was rooted in prayer in answer to prayer the spirit of God was present and we had conversion after conversion wrote Williams of the earliest days in his own firm and that atmosphere continued unabated they believed also that the Bible would do its own work and it did but they knew that without personal contact prayer would not be used and they sought to crown their social friendship by straightforward talks one by one alone with those whom they wish to pass the secret of

[ 31 : 01 ] Christ they came to realize also that a hothouse spiritual atmosphere would not bring lasting results and they therefore after some hesitation encircled their message with the provision of reading rooms a library and a coffee room they bought a building for such purposes in 1849 and arranged winter lectures at the Exeter Hall in the Strand no such benefits had been offered before to young London men in trade new opportunities of recreation leisure and education began to oust the loneliness and boredom which had led them straight to vice and drink so George Williams like Lord Shaftesbury who became his close friend like Bernardo in the next generation found that his spiritual purpose was making him also a social reformer but like them he never lost sight of that primary spiritual aim and there are two more pages I'll let you read those what a great story what an encouraging story brilliant didn't know about that at all but there are stories like that written in books like this I encourage you to take one if you take one you have to read it that is the trick because if you're like me you take books and put them on shelves never get around to doing it a good holiday book if you're going on holiday it's a good holiday book you'll finish it in a week fantastic fantastic so you see not forgotten and sometimes you need to almost remind your fellows of the past and say oh do you want to know about the founder you could read that this is a good book to give to people who are not

Christians these are interesting stories about ordinary people and how they've come to their own faith in Jesus Christ how they've gone on and encouraged others and he encourages us doesn't it whatever your situation one by one to pray for those around you why not make a note in your diary of those you work alongside with well actually say yeah I'm going to pray for these people by name why not bring it to the church prayer meeting in that way it's good for us to do that isn't it what might

God do in response to those sorts of things and it's it's great to be able to you know walk where these people walked and to see the situations they face and to realize that yes it was it was a 1844 was 180 years ago but not so long ago it was a photograph isn't it it's a photograph I've got a photograph of

Abel and Abraham but we've certainly got a photograph of this guy and it's good to tell each other the stories as well it's good for us to share the stories of our lives with one another you think well it's not like that but it is like that it is like that what's what's the difference 2013 we've got stories to tell we're we're in the life of faith we've got encouragements to bring to one another and we need to share those encouragements so that we just encourage each other along the way so God bless you as you as you read that and if they all go and more are wanted I'll get some more if you find it a blessing pass it on to others as well we're going to sing the closing song it's number 512