

Run with endurance

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Preacher: Nick Hallett

[0 : 00] The reading today is on page 1211. It's Hebrews chapter 11 through to chapter 12 verse 3, page 1211.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it 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 more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.

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.

[1 : 28] 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 by faith.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive 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. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

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.

[2 : 44] For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.

But as it is, they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. 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.

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 of the 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.

[3 : 52] By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and 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 on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled 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, enforced 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.

[5 : 27] 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 a 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. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and 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. Our second reading is from the penultimate chapter of the final book of the Bible.

[6 : 58] Revelation chapter 21, on page 1250. And we'll read the first seven verses.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, Behold, I am making all things new.

[8 : 17] Also he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. And he said to me, It is done.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty, I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God, and he will be my son. Who would win in a race between a cheetah and a human?

Cheetahs are famous for being the fastest land animal, and can run up to 120 kilometers per hour. Usain Bolt can run roughly up to about 44 kilometers an hour.

So who would win in a race? The answer is, it depends how long the race is. See, over short distances, the human athlete has no chance.

[9 : 29] But when it comes to long distances, the human would actually win very easily. Because humans are built to endure. Many of you, I guess, would have watched the London Marathon in April, in which the Kenyan long-distance runner, eludes Kipkoji, one, running 26 miles in blistering heat, the hottest London Marathon on record.

And what matters in the London Marathon? Well, it's not the first mile, but the next 26 miles. In a marathon, there is just one thing that matters, and that is to keep going, to run with endurance.

Well, today we're looking at the book of Hebrews, chapter 11 and 12. And the writer tells his readers and us that there's only one thing that matters, and that is to run with endurance.

And he uses this imagery of a marathon to describe the Christian life. And running the Christian life is even more difficult than running a marathon.

There's more at stake. The race is far longer. There are more obstacles and distractions. But the prize is far greater as well. Not just a medal at the London Marathon, but a whole city in the new world that God will make.

[10:48] Now, perhaps you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, and you might be tempted at this point to switch off and say, well, this isn't really relevant to me. I mean, I'm not even in this race. So I don't really need to listen.

Well, if that's you, then have a look at what the Christian race is like, even if it's from the sidelines. Watch the runners running. Because the book of Hebrews gives us a glimpse of the heavenly city that Christians think is worth keeping going for.

And it will show you Jesus, the ultimate athlete, who ran like no one has ever run. The book of Hebrews, if you're not that familiar with it, was written to Christians who had lost sight of the prize. And they'd lost sight of their best runner, Jesus. They kept on getting distracted by things around them that they thought were better than Jesus. I guess it's a lot like us.

We get distracted, don't we, by the gadgets, the iPhones, the holidays, the houses, and we think that they are better than Jesus. And the writer of the Hebrews says time and time again, Jesus is better.

[11:59] The first ten chapters he's spent saying that Jesus is better. He's better than the Old Testament prophets. He's better than angels. He's better than Moses. He's better than the high priest. He's better than the old sacrifice. He's better than the old covenant.

Jesus is so much better because he's God himself. And all we need to do is have faith in him. Hopefully you'll have noticed as Helen was reading a chapter 11 that we get this repeated phrase time and time again by faith.

By faith. By faith. It's repeated all through the chapter. But I wonder what you think faith is. I guess in the media, faith is portrayed as a vague, private, sort of mystical feeling completely devoid of rationality or evidence.

Faith is seen as blind, believing something almost despite evidence to the contrary. Some of you will know Alice in Wonderland in which the Queen says that believing impossible things, well it just takes practice.

Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. Well that's not the Bible's view of faith at all. The Bible describes faith as trust.

[13:14] So everyone has faith because everyone trusts something. And trusting the God of the Bible is the only rational thing to do. Because when you've seen who he is, you've seen what he's created, you've seen how much you need him, where else would you go?

Who else will you look to? All throughout history God has kept his promises. So to trust his promises about things you can't yet see, well it's not irrational, it's the only sensible thing to do. So how do we have faith? The faith of Hebrews 11. How do we run with endurance in the Christian life? Well the writer to the Hebrews tells us to do three things, which you'll find on the back of your service sheets there.

It might help you to look at. The first is to look at the cloud of witnesses, to look at other runners. The second is to look at Jesus, the greatest runner. And the third is to look at the prize, the city God has prepared for us.

So firstly he says, look at the cloud of witnesses. And this is our first and longest point from chapter 11 all the way through verses 1 to 40.

[14:28] You might have noticed at the beginning of chapter 12 it says, therefore, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Which refers to all of the Old Testament believers, runners, in chapter 11.

And the reason the writer has mentioned so many is to give his readers an overwhelming sense of encouragement. There are so many other runners in the race. Not just other Christians today, but Christians who have gone before.

Now the important thing to know about these guys in chapter 11 is that they weren't superheroes. In fact, like us, many of them were failures.

But like us, they had God's word and they had faith even though they didn't receive things promised in their lifetime. Have a look at verse 13 with me of chapter 11.

Chapter 11, verse 13. It says, these all died in faith. not having received things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.

[15 : 33] They didn't receive what was promised in their lifetime. So have a look at the beginning of chapter 11 together with me. The writer says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

For by it the people of old received their commendation. See, faith is being convinced that God is worth trusting even though we haven't received what he's promised.

It's a conviction of things not yet seen but based on God's word. And the writer immediately gives us an example of one of the most fundamental examples of faith you can have.

The belief that God is the creator. Have a look at verse 3 with me. 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.

The Bible clearly teaches that God is the creator of all things. He's separate from his creation and no one created God. He has always existed. Now when you or I look at the world around us we can't deny that it exists.

[16 : 40] It must have come from somewhere and you can ask even a young child they'll tell you that if you start with nothing you get nothing. It's not complicated.

The universe must have had a cause and rather than the universe just coming into being for no particular reason the Bible teaches that God who is infinitely powerful created everything out of nothing.

So to believe that it is to have faith but it's not a blind faith because it's based on what we can see around us and ultimately it's based on believing God's word he said he created the world and we should believe him.

I wasn't there you weren't there but God was. Now we don't have time to look at Abel and Enoch in verses 4 and 5 but if you're interested you can have a look at Genesis chapter 4 and 5 in the Old Testament as examples of those who had faith.

The writer goes on and talks about Noah in verse 7 and he said that he is someone who had faith. He was warned by God concerning events as yet unseen. You see it's not that Noah saw the rain coming down and thought quick I better build an ark.

[17 : 52] That would have been too late. He started building before he saw the rain. I mean people around would have laughed at him but he had a conviction of things he didn't yet see.

Not by blind faith as if you know just in case it starts raining. No God had said that he judged the world because people had turned their backs on the God who made them.

Noah trusted God's word and he obeyed. Or what about in verse 8 the writer talks about Abraham and he alludes to Genesis 12 when God called Abraham to leave his home even though he didn't know where he was going.

I mean Abraham didn't have Google Maps he didn't have any idea of where he was off to but he trusted God because verse 10 he was looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God.

And we'll think about the heavenly city a bit later but the point is that Abraham looked forward. He trusted God even though he couldn't see the future and eventually God gave him descendants as numerous as stars in the sky.

[19 : 02] Now I wonder what you make of all these characters in the Old Testament they all seem to trust God even though they can't see the future and they haven't received what was promised. Perhaps you're here and you think to yourself well if only God would show me where I'm going in life if only God would give me the child I want or the house I want or the job I want then maybe I'd have faith in him.

Well that sort of faith wouldn't have got Abraham very far would it? I mean he'd never have left home. Abraham trusted God even though he couldn't see where he was going because he knew that God was faithful.

And it's because God's people left home that they are described as aliens and strangers exiles in verse 13. They had their eye on something better and you see in verse 16 what they had their eye on they desired a better country that is a heavenly one.

You would have thought wouldn't you that after all their slavery in Egypt they're wandering through the desert for years and years all their battle in Canaan you would have thought they would have breathed a sigh of relief and thought finally we're home.

But they don't they know it's only temporary because they have their eye fixed on a better country. The writer comes back to Abraham doesn't he in verse 17 as an example of faith and he gives the example of Genesis 22 where Abraham offers his son Isaac up as a sacrifice.

[20 : 35] Now in the Old Testament the nations around Israel they practice child sacrifice as offering to their God and the God of the Bible had specifically commanded them never to do such a terrible thing.

So how can God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Especially since God had promised that Isaac would be the way that he blessed the world. I mean how is God going to be faithful to his promises if Isaac is dead?

Well the answer is in verse 19 have a look down with me at verse 19 he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead.

See Abraham knew that God could raise Isaac from death it wasn't a blind faith he knew that God had power to give life and to take life and God provided a ram instead of sacrificing Isaac.

And of course we see echoes of this don't we in Jesus the son of God sacrificed for us on the cross even though it was through Jesus that God was going to bring blessing to the world and God did literally raise Jesus from the dead.

[21 : 46] The writer goes on in verse 23 to talk about Moses and when Moses grew up in Pharaoh's palace he made a choice he was under the protection of Pharaoh's daughter but he made the choice of faith the choice that we must make.

So have a look at how it describes Moses in verse 25 he was choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

And then verse 26 he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt for he was looking forward to the reward. Isn't that astonishing?

I mean it would have been so easy for Moses to live a comfortable sheltered life in Pharaoh's palace enjoying wealth and prosperity rather than suffering with the Israelites.

But he wanted to identify with their God and even though he didn't know it the writer says here in a way he was identifying with Jesus the supreme example of suffering.

[22 : 54] He says that Moses was a type of Christ because just as Jesus left the palace of heaven and came to earth to suffer with the people so Moses years earlier had left Pharaoh's palace to suffer with the Israelites.

I mean why would he do that? Well because Moses knew that identifying with Christ was greater worth than the treasures of Egypt. I wonder if you think the treasures of London are more valuable than identifying with Christ.

many of you have treasures maybe not the treasures of Egypt but treasures nonetheless perhaps your house your job your bank balance but for Moses the choice is easy he chose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin rather than enjoy a comfortable middle class life in Pharaoh's palace.

that's the faith that Moses had and it's the same faith that leads the Israelites to cross the Red Sea in verse 29 it's the same faith by which the walls of Jericho fall in verse 30 and it's the same faith that Rahab the Gentile prostitute had in verse 31 now perhaps you're sitting here and you're getting a bit overwhelmed with all this long list of Old Testament believers but that's how the writer's feeling he gathers himself together and says what more should I say in verse 32 I haven't got time to tell you about all these judges Gideon Barak Samson Japhat or King David or the prophet Samuel or any of the Old Testament prophets but they too had this kind of faith we haven't got time to look at all the people he alludes to in verse 33 to 38 but just in case we've missed the point he concludes in verse 39 that all these though commended through their faith did not receive what was promised because verse 40

God had provided something better for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect so God had always planned for the fulfillment of his promises in the Old Testament to include us Christians today and throughout the ages only with the coming of Jesus would the Old Testament believers be made perfect so we're at the end of chapter 11 a bit of a whistle stop tour but the writers showed that there's lots of runners running the race with endurance and the theme isn't a triumphant happily ever after health wealth and prosperity theme tune is it it's a running and intense suffering despite not receiving what was promised it's a looking forward and anticipation of something better to come so imagine yourself running the Christian race and this whole cloud of witnesses all around you are cheering you on they're saying come on keep running

[25 : 59] God has something better for us he's prepared a city for us the writer of the Hebrews doesn't want us to look straight at Jesus he doesn't want us to ignore the Old Testament and jump straight to Jesus he wants us to look at the cloud of witnesses so read the Old Testament have a look at what these people of faith meant what did it mean for them to run with endurance go along to growth group and see in God's big picture how the people of the Old Testament kept on trusting in God's promises you could read Christian biographies of Christians today and throughout history and why not ask someone perhaps someone who brought you or someone who's been a Christian for a long time how do you keep going what does it mean for you to run with endurance in the Christian life have a look at the cloud of witnesses secondly and much more briefly have a look at Jesus crucified and exalted and that's from chapter 12 verses 1 to 3 so have a look at chapter 12 verses 1 with me therefore since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus before we even begin to look at Jesus the greatest runner in the race we have to get rid of something did you see what he said two things we have to get rid of lay aside every weight and get rid of sin which clings so closely travel light for those who've watched the London marathon you'll have noticed that there's quite a few people running in funny outfits over the years we've had a spider man people running as chickens a rhino a telephone box where's wally a gorilla cyber men and a storm trooper but how many of the elite athletes run in fancy dress I mean would would elu kip koji or mo far would they dress up as cartoon characters no because they want to travel light they want to get rid of every weight possible there is nothing that can weigh them down I wonder if you drew a picture of yourself running the Christian race what it would look like would you be interested in the race would you be running in the right direction the writer of the Hebrews says that we should get rid not just the sin of going our own way but of anything that distracts us from running the race so ask yourself what is distracting me from running the Christian race your career ambitions your plans for your children your holidays abroad get rid of it travel light turn away from everything that slows you down and once we've turned away from everything we can look to

Jesus see how the writer describes him in verse two looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising its shame and seated at the right hand of the throne of God there is no greater runner than Jesus he is the and he ran the perfect race he endured not just suffering but crucifixion on a Roman cross and not reluctantly either do you see what he said joyfully for the joy that was set before him the joy with being in his father's presence at the right hand of the throne of God the joy of seeing people saved for a relationship with their creator and the point is you will never suffer more than Jesus so verse three consider him who endured from sin such hostility against himself that you will not grow weary or faint hearted I don't know how you're feeling this morning but perhaps you're weary of running the Christian race maybe you've been socially rejected or excluded at work or at the school gate perhaps people have laughed at you or made your life difficult in all kinds of ways well consider Jesus he endured such hostility and yet he stayed joyful he kept on running because of the prize and like him we will be rejected but also exalted all runners of the race will be with him forever maybe you're here and you've never really looked at Jesus properly you've got this idea of Jesus as sweet Jesus meek and mild but you've never looked at the Jesus of the Bible the suffering servant who was crucified and exalted to glory we'll take another look at him in the Bible and verse 3 says consider him think about him look at what he suffered look at what he endured and look at where he is now third thirdly and finally look at the city that

[31 : 25] God has prepared for us and that's from chapter 11 and we get hints of it every so often in verse 10 16 and verse 26 God is preparing a city for his people and this is a city we read about in Revelation 21 earlier it's a city that the whole of the Bible has been working towards the new Jerusalem you see the old Jerusalem that the Israelites lived in at one point was never the real thing it was always meant to point forward to the new Jerusalem the heavenly city many of you know C.S.

Lewis chronicles and the chronicle of the last battle where he describes beautifully this idea that heaven is the real thing he says that as Narnia comes to an end and they find themselves in Aslan's country he says that for them it was only the beginning of the story all their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page now at last they were beginning chapter one of the great story which no one on earth has read which goes we saw this

didn't we in Hebrews 11 verse 10 Abraham was looking forward to the city whose foundations with designer and builder is God Hebrews 11 16 they desire a better country a heavenly one Moses verse 26 is looking forward to his reward better than the treasures of Egypt see this life was never meant to be the real thing it was never meant to be the main event it was only ever the cover and the title page even for

Moses and Abraham the real city is the new Jerusalem the city of Revelation 21 this is the city that Abraham was looking forward to it's the city that we are looking forward to and unlike the few athletes in the London marathon that get medals you have to be pretty amazing to get a medal all Christians get the prize in the Christian race and it's not floating on clouds it's living in a city as tangible as the city of London that you live in every day but more permanent and far greater I guess the problem for most of us here is that we see the city of London as more tangible than the city of heaven we think more about training for the London marathon than training for the Christian marathon we care more about getting rid of weight in the gym than getting rid of sin or anything that distracts us in the Christian life in his famous book the pilgrim's progress John Bunyan describes the

Christian life as a journey towards the heavenly city and the main character called Christian travels through the city of destruction to the celestial city and despite all kinds of temptations and obstacles weighing him down his eye is fixed on the heavenly city that's his home that's what gives him strength to keep going I guess most of us here are fairly happy to be living in London particularly if we own a home here and while there's nothing wrong with that it creates the illusion that this city is our permanent home but like the city of destruction in pilgrim's progress the city of London is going to be destroyed there's a better city a heavenly city which is our permanent home the Christian life is a marathon it's a race that we need to run with endurance the issue is not just will you keep running today but will you keep running for the rest of your life the writer of the

Hebrews longs us to keep going to have faith in God who keeps his promises so look around at the cloud of witnesses they kept going in unbelievably difficult times look at Jesus the greatest runner who for the joy set before him endured the cross take another look at Jesus now seated at God's right hand and look at the city that God has prepared for us far greater than any city on earth God will give it to all those who keep running let's pray shall we father thank you so much for these words of encouragement from the book of Hebrews thank you so much for all the runners who have run the race with endurance thank you for all the Christians around the world today who are keeping running and we pray father you would help us to fix our eyes on Jesus to get rid of everything which distracts us from him and set our eyes firmly fixed on the heavenly city that you have prepared for us we ask these things for

[36 : 30] Jesus sake amen