

Faithfully enduring (under lockdown and beyond)

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[0 : 00] Perspective in life. It's an excellent thing. If you walk in the countryside, it's easy just to think about the next step.

Will you put your foot down a rabbit hole, step in the nettles or twist that dodgy ankle? The risk is that you miss that critical signpost. Go totally off track.

If you don't keep your eyes open, you can miss the bigger perspective and miss the destination. And it's like that in life.

In our last Women in Partnership talk on hard times, we spoke about seeing God's big plan. We need to have the perspective of his plan so that we can live today in the light of it.

Now many of us have been completely run off our feet under lockdown. Some have been ill, some lonely and some dealing with death.

[1 : 04] But sometimes we may have had a moment to reflect. When we do take time to read our Bibles and pray, the Lord gives us that perspective and real hope, both for now and in the future.

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish converts. They had started well. But as we saw last night from chapter 10, facing persecution, they were in grave spiritual danger. They were tempted to turn back to their Jewish religion. The letter is written to help them faithfully endure. Chapter 11 of Hebrews shows us what faith really is.

I'm going to read verse 1. So Hebrews 11, verse 1. Follow along with me. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Faith is a gift given by God to every believer. The Holy Spirit helps believers to trust fully in Him and His promises.

[2 : 22] He assures us of things now and in the future. It's not a feeble hope like, I hope I don't feel tired tomorrow. It's a sure hope because of the character of God.

He is trustworthy. We are to be convicted of things not seen because we trust wholeheartedly in the one who promises.

In the verses that follow, we are given a list of believers from the Old Testament who had faith in the things hoped for. Before we look at a few verses in detail, let's reflect for a moment on our own generation.

In some senses, as Christian women, if we are living in the same time, in the same place, there is a sense in which we are a generation together.

We live in the section of history between Jesus' first coming and His second. What a privilege that is. Even in hard times, we can see God face to face because we know the Lord Jesus.

[3 : 35] If we have that perspective in life, it changes everything. We have a Saviour who loves us so much that He's died to save us from the penalty our sin deserves – death.

Instead, we have a sure hope of heaven, and we belong to His family now. Let's focus on verses 24 to 26.

Here we have an excellent example of someone who chose to live wholeheartedly for the Lord, despite the suffering it brought him – Moses. So verse 24 of chapter 11.

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 of greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. In these verses, we can see three temptations – prestige, pleasure and prosperity.

[5 : 01] Let's take a first temptation – prestige – and that was in verse 24. I suspect most of you know the story of Moses.

He was born in Egypt at a time when the Egyptian king Pharaoh was treating the Jewish people as slaves. He had a genocidal regime.

He ordered the murder of every single Jewish baby boy. Moses was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter from a basket on the Nile.

He grew up with all the prestige of living as a prince. Egypt was the superpower of the day. He could have lived with the prestige that that brought.

But, as verse 24 tells us, Moses had faith. Faith in God and God's promises.

[6 : 01] When he was grown up, it says, he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Instead, he chose to be counted amongst the Jewish slaves.

Are we at Grace Church Dulwich tempted to want prestige? It's a natural human desire to be appreciated by others. We want to be useful, needed, thanked.

We want to make our mark. Do we want prestige more than we think we do? Some of us may hide the desire more than others.

We might want that job, not because it's well paid, but because we like to be thought of as successful. To be held in high regard.

We want to do something worthwhile. And sometimes that's for status and our own pride. In our culture, it's very typical to be evaluated by our job title.

[7 : 08] So perhaps we buy into that world view and sometimes we hide that temptation. Even from ourselves. Now over lockdown, I've been living with five men, three undergraduates and one just into his first job.

As well as my husband, Andrew. The youngsters have been keeping me very amused with stories from their friends. There's one, a very memorable story of how a friend of theirs decided to do a mock Instagram story of her whole day.

From what she was having for breakfast, to what workout she was doing, to what she was drinking for coffee, to what she was reading, to where she was sunbathing.

Now, obviously, that was a spoof takeoff of the sort of things that celebrities might post to boost their following. But behind it, there is that real temptation we all face to present ourselves as we like to be seen.

Influencers have many thousands of followers. Influencers have many thousands of followers. But perhaps we are not so different.

[8 : 23] Maybe it's a lifestyle choice. Perhaps we are very wholehearted about our fitness regime or our diet. How we dress or how our homes look.

Of course, under lockdown, many things may have changed in your household. The bathroom may not be as clean as normal. I know mine's not. Or the kids' schoolwork has had to go on the back burner on occasion.

You may have been furloughed. But think back to pre-lockdown. Perhaps there was that job promotion at the school or at the office.

A promotion that we would have loved to get. But in fact, if we were to take on that increased role, perhaps we would neglect other things of importance.

Well, for the sake of our relationship with God, the people in our family or our church family, we may want to consider turning some things down.

[9 : 26] We may have to think seriously about our choices. Is prestige too important to us? By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

He chose faith in God. Our second temptation. Pleasure. And that was from verse 25. Have a look. Choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. Moses gave up a life of extravagant luxury. Food, drink, sexual pleasures.

To be associated instead with poor, downtrodden slaves. He sided with God's people. The people he had been born into. Now, I don't know how tempted you think you are by the pleasures of this world.

But in lockdown, I've been tempted to have a bit too much food, a bit too much wine. Basically to have more than is good for me.

[10 : 40] And the bathroom scales don't lie. Worldly pleasures are a great temptation for many of us. I've asked friends to pray for me, for the fruits of the Spirit, self-control being one.

I long to be like Moses. He chooses to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin, which looks so attractive.

The condensation on the gin and tonic glass on a hot day. Now, worldly pleasures take many forms. We think they will fulfil that deep longing within us.

Be it socialising, reading, watching a Netflix series. Our Heavenly Father has given us many pleasures. But not everything is good for us if we idolise those pleasures and they take God's place. I don't know what idols look like for you. Frankly, you'll have idols even if you think you're immune. I've been challenged about what I've been watching on Netflix.

[11 : 55] Recently, on one occasion, the graphic nature of the sex scenes went beyond what I eventually felt was appropriate. My conscience pricked.

At last, I decided to fast forward through any remaining sex scenes. Have we said in our minds and hearts, I choose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin?

Have we made that decision for ourselves, really and truly? Living with students recently has shown me the pressures they face if they choose to be mistreated with the people of God.

For example, if they choose every Sunday evening to go to church or every Thursday evening to go to Bible study for the whole of their time at university, they will get ribbed.

If they choose to have only one pint after the netball or hockey match and then move on to lemonade, they are teased or bullied.

[13 : 04] Well, it's the same for us. If we have really chosen to be mistreated with the people of God, then we will have to accept that non-Christian friends, family, neighbours and colleagues will simply not understand our choices and will tease us or worse.

We will have a good question. Moses chose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. Have we chosen pleasure?

Or to stand with Christ's family? Our third temptation. Prosperity. And that was there in verse 26.

Have a look at it. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

This verse shows us that by faith Moses cared more about Christ's opinion of him than all the treasures of the world. Have we said the same thing in our own hearts? Have we said that we aren't bothered about the treasures of this life?

[14 : 16] Now that can be financial security, but it can be other types of prosperity too. Have we decided in our own minds, made this decision for ourselves?

The treasure Moses was looking for was a relationship with God, so he proactively chose to give up the prosperity of royalty. He was looking ahead to the heavenly kingdom.

He had a sure and certain hope, even if he couldn't see it with his eyes. So he lived by faith. He was looking to the reward.

If we consider the reproach of Christ greater wealth than anything else, our choices will be different. When I was a very young Christian, I met several women who gave up what non-Christians would have called success in the world.

Prosperity, if you will. They had met Jesus in the Bible and had chosen to give him their whole lives. Deciding, for example, to train in Bible teaching and to work in outreach rather than continuing in their cushioned, prosperous lives.

[15 : 39] You will know others who have made such choices to give up a prosperous, comfortable life. Now this choice will look different for all of us.

Prosperity in our generation may not be the prosperity of the royal family of Egypt. But by and large, we do have a comfortable life materially. Most of us aren't wondering where the next meal is coming from.

For us and our families, most have some way of putting food on the table. We have education, which leads to qualifications. Prosperity cushions us.

Now, in lockdown, I know a lot of us have had a very difficult time. I'm not underestimating that. But let's get a spiritual perspective. Let's copy Moses and the others from Hebrews chapter 11.

So pray for the perspective to consider whose good opinion we seek. By our sinful natures, we are all prone to want a prosperous and comfortable life.

[16 : 50] Moses considered his relationship with Jesus of more value than any worldly prosperity. How we work out our priorities in practice will look different for each one of us.

There is always space to challenge ourselves in this area. Whose opinion do I worry about? Is it Jesus's? Could it be that a secular worldview has crept into my thinking?

Have I lost perspective of the final destination? Am I following the right path? Now, a great way to help us put this Bible teaching into practice is to see how wholehearted Christians have lived for Jesus in the situations he has put them in.

Last month, I was captivated to read about a man called C.T. Studd. He gave up his prestige as an England cricketer, his pleasure as a Cambridge graduate, and his prosperity coming from a wealthy family, to preach to people abroad who had never heard the good news of Jesus.

This led to much fruit for many generations. This man had given up everything so that, like Moses, he could truly say he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

[18:19] You will know Helen Sheridan, either personally or through our regular praying for her. Helen's wholeheartedness led her to leave her comfortable life as a maths teacher, to come first to us as our women's worker, and then to leave our church family to be our mission partner in the west of Ireland.

She has chosen to give up prestige, pleasure and prosperity to serve Jesus in a country where the Bible is rarely preached clearly.

Now I know such enthusiasm has not always been well regarded in our culture. Sacrifice has not been a favoured word or idea, although this has changed slightly with the commendation of NHS and care home frontline workers in recent days.

Certainly enthusiasm in Christian things is often mocked. Are we more concerned with happiness than holiness? But if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's surely to have a true perspective of the world as it really is.

What is really important in life? Do we concentrate on our rights or the rights of our families rather than our responsibilities? Do we stress our freedom rather than our debt to Jesus?

[19:51] Let's delight to do as Moses did and seek to do as Christ would have us in all situations with the help of the Holy Spirit. So as we finish, let's pray that the Lord will give us true spiritual perspective so we can make the right choices so we may faithfully endure.

Choose standing with God's people over prestige. Choose self-control over pleasure.

Choose the imperishable reward over prosperity. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see. Let's see.

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