

Therefore...

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Preacher: Chris Willis

[0 : 00] This morning we are starting a new short series in Hebrews 12.! So we're just on the first three verses this morning, so I'm going to read that for you if we can have that on the screen.

Therefore, 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.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was set before him, he 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 sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

So, in the Bible, obviously we know that the original text of the Bible wasn't broken up into chapters and verses.

[1 : 09] Actually, helpfully, in the version of the Bibles that we have, it helps us to find things. But chapter 12 is not the start of a new section. It follows directly on from what comes before, starting with the word, therefore.

Hebrews 11 is all about people of faith. So the series that we are about to start on, Hebrews 12, we're starting today, is looking at testimonies.

It's looking at stories of faith. And Hebrews 11 gives us so many of them. So I thought, I haven't done it in a while, so I'm going to do a quiz this morning.

These are well-known, hopefully well-known, people of faith. Some of them are from the Bible. Some of them are from history.

And some of them are from modern day. So I did that to look at and to bring up heroes of faith.

Hebrews 11 talks about people of faith, heroes of faith from the Old Testament, and goes on to talk about all of the prophets.

[2 : 16] Everyone who did amazing things simply because God empowered them to do that. But heroes of faith don't stop in the Bible.

We see throughout history there are people who do amazing things purely because they believe that's what God says should happen.

And they believe they're empowered by God to do so. And we have people today who do that as well. But it's not just celebrities. It's not just famous people who can be heroes of faith.

Actually, there are people sat next to you who may be a hero of faith. Somebody who teaches God to their children. Somebody who helps their neighbour.

Somebody who takes in someone who is homeless just to give them shelter for a few nights. Or feeds them because they can't afford to look after themselves. Or gives their time to run groups for the community or for other things.

[3 : 19] There are all different kinds of faith. Hebrews 12 says, Therefore, since we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

Hebrews tells us that we are surrounded by people of faith. Some who may do amazing world-changing things. Some who will just be very solid and firm Christians.

And inspirational Christians. But Hebrews tells us to learn from those around us. So as we come in to this series, that's what we want to do.

We want to learn from the testimonies, from the stories around us. Because actually, as we do our Christian faith, we're not meant to do it alone.

We're meant to do it with other people who have all of the experience that comes before us. 1 Corinthians 15. If we can have that on the screen. So just verses 3 to 7.

[4 : 24] For what I have received, I pass on to you, as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.

That he was buried. That he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. And that he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.

After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters at the same time. Most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James. Then to all the apostles. And last of all, he appeared to me also. As to one abnormally born. The best answer we have to what we believe is what God has done for us. Your story. If somebody asks you, why are you a Christian? What do you believe? The best answer you can give is your story. The best thing we can learn from is the story, the testimony of those around us.

[5 : 43] But what makes a testimony different to just a story of something nice that happened? Or something that changed the direction of our lives?

It's one thing. And Hebrews 12 tells us that. Continue to run the race prepared for you with your eyes fixed on Jesus.

So over these next few weeks, as we will be hearing testimonies, looking at and talking about testimonies. Any testimony, when we talk about testimonies of faith, is a story that points to Jesus. If we don't point to Jesus, it's just a nice story. Nice stories are great. They're encouraging. They inspire us. But we want them to point us to Jesus and to point others to Jesus as well.

So that's really my second point for today. Nice and short. Nice and punchy. Let's learn from the stories, from the testimonies of those around us.

[6 : 52] From those we have in the Bible, from those throughout history, and from those that we know as well. We learn best from the experience of others. But as we share our testimonies with other people as well, let's remember that they point us to Jesus.

So what do you believe? Do you believe that you are who God says you are? Do you believe in the life and teaching of Jesus, that Jesus is who he says he is?

That's what our testimonies are. It's about what we believe, and it's about what God has done. I'm sure most of you have heard at some point have heard of something called cardboard testimonies. They were very big and popular when I was a young person, and they're still done today as well. The cardboard testimony is just thinking simply about what has God done.

What is your story? But it's not about telling it in a long-winded, five-minute way. It's not even about the elevator pitch testimony, about thinking how can you share what is the most important part of your testimony that you can fit into 30 seconds.

[8 : 20] This is one thing. What is one thing that you believe God has done in your life or God says about you that you could share with somebody else?

What is your story? What one thing would you write down? What was your then and what is your now?

Because your story is a far more powerful testimony to non-Christians as well as to other Christians than anything else can be, other than an encounter with God.

Be clear about that. So we want to have a go at that. Because actually anyone can do this. It doesn't matter how young or how old you are.

Everyone has a story of knowing God. If you do know God, if you are Christian, we all have stories. So I'd love us to have a go at it.

[9 : 26] There are pieces of card at the middle ends of several of the rows and we can make cut up more if we need to. And I think Kate's going to hand out some pencils for me. The younger ones may need some help with writing this.

But I do believe that actually the youngest of you here, you have amazing stories with God just as much as anyone else does as well.

So I'll give a few minutes for you to think about that. So on one side of the card, we write what was the before like. But on the other side of the card, what has God done in your life?

What has he changed? What has he said to you about you? You may want to spend these couple minutes just thinking about it and then write something down, perhaps during our final song, which we will do in a couple minutes.

I'm not going to ask you to show this to anyone. Some churches will do this and say, bring it up to the front. We're not going to do that. This is for you to think about what is your story.

[10 : 31] And then maybe you want to take it home and you want to put it somewhere where you'll see it, where you will regularly be reminded of what God has done in your life.

So over these next few weeks, as we will be hearing testimonies from some individuals and we'll be looking further into Hebrews 12.

What is your testimony? You don't have to share it from the front. You don't have to prepare it in 30 seconds or expand on it or cover all the detail.

What is that one thing that you wrote down that God has done in your life that points us back to Jesus? Let's do this.