

Looking to Jesus

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[0 : 00] Hebrews 12, 1-3 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.

British people probably remember the 1968 Olympics, if they remember anything about it, for the fact that David Hemery won a gold medal for Britain in the 400-meter hurdles.

But there was another very different hero from the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City.

That hero was one who was taking part in the marathon final, a final that was won by an Ethiopian, Mama Waldi, but one hour after Waldi had crossed the line, and as the last few thousand spectators were preparing to leave the stadium, the noise of police sirens and whistles through the gate was heard at the stadium.

[1 : 48] Everybody turned to look at who was coming through the gate, and a sole figure wearing the colours of Tanzania came limping into the stadium. The man's name was John Stephen Aquari.

He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. And his leg was bandaged and bleeding. He had taken a bad fall during the race.

And now all that he could do was to limp his way around the track. And the crowd stood up and they applauded as John Stephen Aquari made that last lap and finished the race.

And when he crossed the line, one man, one of the journalists, asked the question everybody was thinking but didn't verbalise.

You're badly injured. Why didn't you just quit? And Aquari with great dignity responded, my country did not send me 7,000 miles to start this race.

[2 : 54] My country sent me to finish this race. And the Christian life is likened often to a long race, to a marathon type race rather than a sprint.

It is an undertaking that requires from us perseverance. Paul, when he was looking back on his life at the end of his ministry, didn't liken his Christian experience to a stroll in the park, to lying on a bed of roses.

He said, I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. Christian life for Paul and for every true Christian is something that requires effort, that is at times painful, is sometimes gruelling in its requirements to carry on.

And the fact that God supplied Paul with all his resources and energies and enabled him to overcome did not mean that it was not difficult for Paul.

And at the end of his ministry again, and this time writing to Timothy, he describes these hardships and reminds Timothy that these were not exceptional. These were things which Timothy and every Christian can expect, at least in kind.

[4 : 25] You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecution, sufferings.

What kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured, yet the Lord delivered me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Now, as far as the original Hebrew readers are concerned, it seems that they had been caught off balance, as it were, by perhaps the ferocity of the opposition that they are encountering.

They are in danger, as verse 3 indicates, of growing weary, or faint-hearted. Weary has a sense of being exhausted, or discouraged.

Faint-hearted indicates that they were really inclined to give up. They are like the boxer, who has received just one too many blows to the head, and is just ready to tell the trainer he's hard enough, and he's going to throw in the towel.

[5 : 38] They're fed up with the jives from their Jewish friends. They're thinking back to the security that they had when they were worshipping with them, and they are seriously thinking of rejoining the synagogue.

They're tired. And one of the symptoms of people who are weary and thinking about giving up is that they lose focus. And all through the letter, we have had indications that that is the case with these Hebrew Christians.

Paul, again and again, highlights their lack of concentration, or their unwillingness to focus in on the things that are important. Here's a sampling.

Chapter 2, we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard. Chapter 3, the writer tells him to fix your thoughts upon Jesus.

Chapter 4, 1, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short. And chapter 5, verse 11, it's hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.

[6 : 51] Paul's not just speaking in the way that some frustrated teacher might at the inattention of her students. He's recognizing a spiritual malaise.

I've seen it in pastoral ministry often enough that people who are drifting spiritually lose that capacity for studying and meditating on God's Word.

They may be perfectly capable of sustained concentration in the workplace. They may have demanding jobs, but they are continually demanding that as far as doctrine is concerned, it should be kept more and more simple.

You no longer try to understand, says the writer. And so there's a word here for every one of us.

Those of you who are young in age, there's the challenge that if you will take up the gospel race, this is a long race and it is going to require commitment and endurance.

[7 : 57] And those of you who have been on the race for some time, you have to look at yourself and ask yourself, am I still going on with passion and focus?

Or am I growing weary and losing my focus? Well, lack of focus being such a symptom, it's not surprising that the writer wants to encourage his readership to avert their gaze from things which distract and to focus instead on things which will help them to persevere in the race.

Specifically, they are to look back at the great crowd of witnesses that have gone before them. They are to look up at Jesus, who is the great founder and perfecter of their faith.

And they are to look forward at the reward that lies ahead of them. First, they are to look back to the great crowd of witnesses.

The writer's picturing a scene familiar to everyone in the Greek-speaking world of his day. It's this athletic contest in a great amphitheater.

[9 : 17] Probably the Olympic Games, he has in mind, but maybe the Isthmian Games at Corinth. The runners are down in the arena.

And looking down on them from the serried ranks of spectators are a host of people, heroes who have gone on before.

And chapter 11 has some thumbnail sketches of the men and women who persevered by faith in the Old Testament. And now the writer pictures these on, these people from the past whose lives he has briefly reminded the readers, and pictures them now as spurring on those contemporary believers.

Don't give up. Don't turn back. We also faced great opposition. We had our challenges. And we had less light than you have today.

We made it across the finishing line and so can you. Wonderful how inspiring that reminder of those who have gone before us can be.

[10 : 35] Dutch football is undergoing something of a revival. They had a period, has to be said, a lot shorter than Scotland did of not qualifying for significant tournaments.

And now they're on the up. And part of it is because they have a youth training ground near Utrecht where there is serious input into the lives of potentially good footballers.

And in this training ground, in a forest clearing, the young stars of the future are surrounded by statues of great Dutch footballers.

And so you have Johan Cruyff and Ronald de Boer and Ruud Hult and others who made it to the very top of their footballing careers.

And those who are starting off for drawing inspiration from those witnesses around them. And specifically, the writer to the Hebrews says that considering the heroes of the faith will result in us throwing off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles.

[11 : 51] I think this is referring to two things. There are those things which hinder us and also there are sins which are so easily entangled.

Imagine a runner appearing at the starting line with a parka and a rucksack. You know, he's thinking, well, I might get cold so we'll dress up and he's got a rucksack with soft drinks and rolls in case he's running low on calories.

It would be a ridiculous sight. And similarly in the first century people wore long robes and to wear a long robe would have been to risk being all entangled in it as you ran the race.

It would be foolish. Nowadays people wear lightweight athletic outfits, life runs and so on. They want to be streamlined.

They want to be free of anything that would keep them back from running effectively. And there are things the writers think which are not bad in themselves, which are not sinful, but they will hinder us in the Christian race.

[13 : 07] And the implication is that those in the past rid themselves of things which would hinder them and therefore so must we. Verse 1 let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

So in the past men and women did that. And for Abraham for example following the Lord's call to become a pilgrim meant leaving behind his home and culture and everything that was familiar to become Abraham a dress, no fixed abode.

Abraham who was following the call of God. And Moses was ready to renounce the privileges of being an Egyptian prince because he wanted to align with God's people.

There's nothing wrong with having a position of influence and being wealthy and people might have said to Moses can you not be a better influence from the palace than you would in the desert.

But that was not God's way and for Moses to be an effective leader of the people meant coming into the school of God for 40 years as a humble shepherd being stripped down of all of the privilege so that he could run the race which meant leading the people out of bondage.

[14 : 38] And in the same way there are things which for the Christian are not specifically wrong. We would never say that they were sinful but for us at a particular time can become hindrances.

Sometimes we're very prone to ask the question well what's wrong with that? What's sinful about that? And that could well be the wrong question to be asking.

The question that we ought to be asking is will this help me follow Jesus? Is this really helpful or is this a distraction? Is this holding me back?

Is the amount of time I spend on social media a hindrance of reading books or playing golf of whatever non-sinful activity I am devoted to?

Clearly the same holds for things which are actually sinful. Sin which clings so closely. Sin clinging closely bringing or running to a halt things like pride and lust and envy and greed and anger and grumbling and selfishness and all of these things beginning in our thought life before they actually take expression in our actions and our words.

[16 : 14] and if you cut these things off right at the upspringing then it goes no further.

If you entertain these things they incubate they develop into words and actions. And so the writer is telling his readers and telling us let the heroes and heroines of the past inspire you because they laid aside things that hindered and they were careful to walk a godly life.

They had much bigger problems and the light they had was dimmer but they made it through. Be serious. Be earnest about finishing the race. But more importantly whilst we look back we look up and we look to Jesus who is 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.

These past few days we've been thinking about the Normandy landings 6th of June marked the big anniversary of the Normandy landing the 75th anniversary.

Well the first soldier to arrive in Normandy was Lieutenant Norman Poole. He set foot in Nazi occupied France on 6th of June 1944 and was the first of two SAS parties to drop in by parachute five miles west of Saint-Lô he hit the ground 11 minutes past midnight and their task was to divert German attention away from the true destination of the Allied landing force.

[18 : 27] So not only did these SAS men but 200 dummies which were dropped from parachutes landed at this diversion. What must it have been like to have been Norman Poole?

To have been the first one to land? To know that there was nobody ahead of you? To be unsure of any support? To be entering enemy territory?

such courage. Think about the first men that left the landing craft as well. Jumping into the waters of Normandy.

Going through the hail of enemy bombardment and seeking to create a beach head for those who came behind.

Tremendous courage. And inspiring for those who came behind them to know that they were going to take control of enemy gunposts. Jesus is the founder and perfecter or the pioneer and perfecter.

[19 : 43] There are various translations of these words here. The initiator and the finisher of our faith. faith. It's a rich expression and there are three levels of meaning and application for us.

In the first sense, Jesus is the one who began and finished our salvation. Without Jesus, there could be no complete salvation, not needing works to be added.

God. He began and He finished the work. So, He did that objectively. He's the beginner and finisher of our salvation.

But also, in us as individuals, Jesus is the one who begins and completes faith in us. Our faith is begun in us because Jesus is the one who has prayed to the Father that we might have faith.

faith is God's gift. Jesus has prayed to the Father that we might believe and He has prayed that our faith might not fail. But thirdly, Jesus is the great example of faith.

[21 : 01] He is the man of faith, par excellence. He is the model of faith. And that is all the more impressive when we think that Jesus is the Son of God and yet He exercised faith.

He had devotional life throughout His earthly mission. He lived in dependence on His Father and the Holy Spirit.

He spent long hours reading and memorizing the Scriptures. And when He was physically weakened and emotionally drained and the tempter came to Him, Jesus quoted the Scriptures.

He withdrew for extended prayer before making important decisions like the calling of the Twelve. He relied upon His Father to the extent He could say the Son can do nothing of Himself unless it is something He sees the Father doing.

John 5 19. He claimed to speak the very words He heard from the Father. John 8 38. He trusted the Father in the garden as He agonized before Calvary.

[22 : 16] He is the man of faith. At the beginning of chapter 11 the writer describes faith and tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Jesus throughout His life is convinced of the reality of things not seen, the reality of the kingdom of God that He has come to bring in. He is convinced that the defining reality in life is the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

72 return from their first mission trip. Jesus sees the reality of what is going on. I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Look to 18.

He's the man of faith. And what makes Jesus the man of faith such an example to struggling Christians is that throughout the exercise of faith in His Father and reliance on the Spirit, Jesus faced continual opposition by men and by sinful men throughout His life.

Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted. Such hostility. we really struggle when we meet with indifference, don't we, in modern Scotland.

[23 : 38] Jesus endured hostility from sinful people. He was hated by the very people amongst whom He had grown up. When He comes to Nazareth and preaches in the synagogue and then points to the unbelief of the people there, they are enraged.

They say, not this, Joseph's son. And they, when they had heard all these things, we read, all of the synagogue were filled with wrath and they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill in which their town was built so that they could throw him down the cliff.

His own hated Him. The Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, the scribes, the teachers of the law hated Jesus. They plotted continually against Him.

Their questions which sometimes were seemingly innocent were all designed to trap Him. Should we pay taxes to Caesar and such like? Eventually, they made an agreement with a man in his inner circle, Judas, who betrayed him.

How heavy a burden it must have been for the Son of Man to be hated by those from whom one might have expected to meet with affection and respect.

[24 : 59] Jesus' course led him to the awful forsakenness of the cross. He despised the shame.

The cross epitomized shamefulfulness. For a Roman, the cross was such an ignominious way that it was actually illegal to crucify a Roman citizen.

It was for anybody else, any of the subjugated nations, but not for a Roman. It was a shameful, shameful death. And Jesus scorned it.

Jesus embraced it. Christians, young Christians, are we ashamed of Jesus sometimes?

being afraid of being associated with Christian people, with Jesus, does that change the way we behave or speak sometimes? Older folks were not immune from that, from fleeing the shame of being associated with Jesus and his church.

[26 : 14] Jesus despised the shame of the cross. Let's scorn the thought of shame keeping us from being faithful. Jesus is our great encouragement.

And lastly, we look not only back and up but forward. We're told Jesus endured the cross sustained by the joy that was set before him.

Now, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame.

It was a knowledge that his suffering was productive, that there was a joy at the end of the race that sustained Jesus in his darkest hours and in his moments of greatest weakness.

Isaiah 53 10 speaks of Jesus seeing the fruit of the travail of his soul and being satisfied. The travail of his soul.

[27 : 30] The picture in Scripture is used of the woman in labor suffering an intense period of pain but being sustained by the thought of the life that will come from that pain.

A productive pain that leads to joy. And Jesus endured the cross, endured its shame because of joy set before him. What was the joy?

Well, it was to enter into his father's presence and pleasure. The joy was to be given the place of victory. He's now seated at the father's right hand. This is not inactivity.

It's the posture of one who is one and is triumphant. It's a time of unceasing activity for Jesus who continually prays for us and who sustains the cosmos.

But his work is done. The battle over. The triumph is complete. No longer despised by sinful men. He is adored by sinless angels.

[28 : 33] And Christians too have a reward to look forward to. Moses who was looking forward to his reward. We are looking forward to being freed from sin and its effects.

To know life perfect in all of its senses. Eternal joy. Work that continually fulfills. Worship that is unblemished. Love that marks out everything.

Jonathan Edwards once wrote, Heaven is a world of love. Joy set before us that we should persevere on our way.

At school I used to hate cross-country running. Hated it with a passion. And the reason really was that it seemed so utterly pointless.

We ran round and round pitches that were always muddy and you weren't going anywhere, you were just going round and round and round. I always got a stitch early on.

[29 : 35] I hated cross-country running. God does not call us to meaningless exhausting drills like laps around a field going nowhere.

He calls us to a race that has a great goal. There are all kinds of powerful incentives along the way. He calls us to joy.

And as we come to the table, let us look to Jesus because he is powerfully presented to our gaze in the symbols of bread and wine.

And let that gaze, that fixed look, galvanize our affections, stir up our resolve to go on, persevere, to finish the race.

Amen. God bless him, to be his world. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. We're going to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and we will do so coming to the table after the singing of the next psalm.

[30 : 54] and all who love the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and are in full communion or in fellowship with any branch of his church are invited to come.

We remind ourselves at this time that the qualification for coming is not in our own works or efforts or sincerity or anything else, but in Jesus and only because we are trusting him do we have a right to come.

We come not because we feel good enough to come today, but we come because we are hungry and conscious of our need and believing that if we obey as God's children that we will be fed, nurtured, built up in our most holy faith.

Jesus says, do this in remembrance of me. So therefore, if you love the Lord and if you are in communion with his church, you are invited to take and to eat and to drink.

Okay. Okay. Okay. Let's take a bath in at the■■■ for a while. We get basically Männerhip. Okay. Okay. Okay.

[32 : 09] So then we come back and introduce Sam's ■■■ Kaique.