

Activate

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Date: 26 July 2015

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[0 : 00] Well, let me add my welcome. My name is Sam, I'm one of the pastors here, and it is good to get to open God's Word with you tonight. Keep that passage open in front of you.

Just recently I had the chance to be at a conference, and something they did as part of the conference was pay tribute to someone who had achieved something significant. His name is Professor Graham Clark, so he's an Australian professor, and he is the man who invented the bionic ear.

And as impressive as his achievement is, what I love about his story, and many stories of people who have done significant things, is where those stories begin.

It's to think that to get to the point where he actually achieved his goal, there was a moment where that dream was birthed. And what you may not know about him is Graham Clark grew up with a father who was deaf.

I actually found out this morning that one of our morning parishioners, Marie Farley, went to university with Graham and actually knows him. And she was giving me all sorts of extra details. So Graham Clark, growing up, had a father who was a pharmacist and had a chemist, and he was completely deaf.

[1 : 10] And the incredible challenges that his dad faced were what birthed a dream for Graham Clark to ultimately be able to deal with that issue and fix it. And it's a really exciting thing, I think, to not just see the finish line, but to see the journey that was taken to that greatness, to that significance.

And I wonder if when you hear stories like that, or stories like we just read in Hebrews 11, if there's a part of you that thinks, I wish I had a vision like that.

I wish I had a dream for significance. I wish I had something that I was just going to achieve. I wish I could somehow imagine me being the one achieving something great.

What if it's there and you just haven't seen it yet? What if the path to greatness is right in front of you, but you just haven't taken the steps to walk down it yet?

Throughout Scripture, there are many, many people who have achieved great things for God. And in every single one of them, there is a common ingredient. Faith. The passage we just read in Hebrews 11 is sometimes known as the Faith Hall of Fame.

[2 : 25] We think it's this list of kind of faith superheroes, people who just had incredibly massive and impressive faith. But actually, Hebrews 11 is not about them.

It's about faith. And faith is about God. The superhero, if you like, in Hebrews 11 is God himself. The powerful one in Hebrews 11 is God himself.

Faith is the thing that achieves significance for everyone in Hebrews 11. The same faith that all Christians have in the same God. See, faith isn't just about getting a ticket to heaven.

Faith is a foundation. Faith is a power that God wants to unleash in your life. Not just an end point power or an end point destination. It's a foundation and a power that can be unleashed in us to achieve something significant in our lives now.

This is week three of Activate. If this is your first week here or you've been away for a couple of weeks, all the excitement that you walked past on your way in is Activate. It's that time twice a year where we stop and have a chance to connect and serve in church.

[3 : 42] So there's a chance for joining small groups. There's a chance for committing to doing ministry. And one of the questions we've been asking over the last three weeks is, how can you invest yourself in the work that God is doing here at St. Paul's Chatswood?

So how can you be a part of caring for people who are in need? How can you be a part of bringing hope to people who don't have it? What part can you play? And really the question behind that question is the one we're looking at tonight.

The question is, what would your life and my life and our life together look like if we genuinely shared the faith of those who have gone before us?

I mean, as we begin to dream about that possibility, dream about the possibility of God's power achieving something significant in us, we need to be clear on what we mean when we say faith.

It's not a blank check. But what do we mean? First off, let's be clear on a few things that faith isn't. Firstly, faith is not blind and it's not baseless. I think I've said to you guys before, faith is a word that sometimes gets substituted for belief.

[4 : 53] And they're close, but they're not exactly the same thing. If I was to climb onto the roof of the church and decide that I wanted to fly, it doesn't matter how hard I flap my arms, if I jump off, I'm going to fall and I'm going to fall quickly.

Because there's no basis for the belief that I can fly. Faith is actually about the thing that you believe, more than how much belief you have.

See, desire is not a sufficient basis for faith. It doesn't matter how much I want to fly or how much I believe it, there's no basis for either of those things. The thing that I'm trusting in, the object, is what defines faith.

So every time I'm driving in my car and I press on the brake, I'm placing my faith in the brakes to work and to stop me before I have a crash. But it's not my belief in the brakes that makes them work and helps me stop.

It's the functionality of the brakes. It's actually their ability to stop the wheels in such a way that I don't hit another car. My belief in the brakes, if they're not functional, is irrelevant.

[6 : 01] I'm still going to crash. It's the functionality of the thing that I'm trusting, that I'm believing in, that I'm depending on. What matters when we talk about faith in any sphere of life is not so much the faith itself, but it's what we're placing our faith in.

It's the object that's being trusted and depended on. And so for Christians, faith is not some vague, ethereal idea that gets kind of new content depending on what situation we're facing.

You know, I have faith to fly, I have faith to jump high, whatever it is. Christian faith has specific content. It has a specific object. Faith, if it's Christian, is necessarily and firmly founded on the promise of God.

Have a look in Hebrews 11 at verse 7. It says that, So Noah had faith in what?

His desire to see the world flooded? His hope that God would judge the sinful people all around him? No. His faith is based on the fact that God warned him.

[7 : 16] God's word was there. God promised something and Noah believed that God would follow through. Now you've got to remember, this is just a snapshot of a whole story back in Genesis 6.

Noah was ridiculed when he did this. He was building the biggest boat that the world has ever seen in the middle of nowhere with no means of getting it anywhere near water. Probably in the middle of a drought.

And so people said, You've lost your mind, Noah. You are in all sorts. But he stood firm. He kept his faith because he was trusting something that was immovable.

He was trusting the words of God who doesn't change. Faith is not a blind step in the dark full of optimistic hope. It's confidence based on the sure promise of God.

So faith is not blind or baseless. The second thing faith is not is it's not seen. Hebrews 11 and verse 13 says, All these people were still living by faith when they died.

[8 : 22] They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. Or verse 39 of chapter 11. All of these people, these heroes apparently of the faith, were still living by faith when they died.

So they hadn't yet been given the things they were promised. The things that were shaping their whole life. The things that were motivating them to sacrifice, to suffer for following God with unwavering commitment.

They didn't receive them. And that's because faith is by its nature forward looking. Faith is future oriented.

It's about something that you don't yet have. Something that's just that little bit beyond your reach. And that's important. Because it reminds us as Christians, that stepping out in faith, is not just a way of kind of having a transaction to get something we want from God.

Faith's not necessarily going to be about getting immediate gratification back because we've done something bold for God. The definition that Hebrews gives us is quite clear. In verse 1 of chapter 11.

[9 : 48] Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Now I have a slightly adjusted definition. Faith is a certain future hope that changes your uncertain present.

Faith is a certain future hope that changes your uncertain present. See, faith brings perspective into situations that would otherwise be overwhelming. Faith has the power to take something that could be hopeless and give you a firm footing.

Even though faith is future directed, we must understand that it has power now. It is about something we look forward to, something we haven't yet received, but it has power now.

And so the question remains, what does it look like to live by faith? And I guess maybe more specifically, what would your life and my life and our life look like if the defining reality of our existence was the death and resurrection of Jesus?

What if that was the looking glass through which we perceived every circumstance that we faced, every relationship, every job, every engagement, every challenge, every obstacle?

[11 : 07] Because this chapter in Hebrews is called the Faith Hall of Fame because it's clearly a picture of significant life. These people did significant things.

And it doesn't matter whether you're three or 23 or 103. Faith is the ingredient in this chapter. It's the thing common to every single person who's mentioned.

And today, we need to lift our eyes and begin to dream. Begin to imagine just how incredible it might be for God to work through us in a similar kind of way.

because I can guarantee that God's plan for you is bigger and better than your plan for you. So as you begin to visualize that, let's unpack what the path might look like to get there.

Four things that faith looks like from Hebrews 12. 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.

[12 : 16] 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.

The first thing that faith looks like is surrounded. Faith is not a personal or isolated reality. Our Christian faith is a communal activity. One of the things that seeds our faith, or that strengthens our faith, or even gives birth to our faith, is actually seeing faith in the lives of other people.

And not even necessarily the superheroes, like in chapter 11 here, but surrounded by brothers and sisters here in this community, who are living out faith in their jobs, in their families.

People like the Fitzroy family in our 930 congregation, who dealt with a really difficult and challenging situation with the health of their second born son, and yet continued to trust God in spite of the uncertainty.

Or living out faith like the Fitzpatricks, who moved to a suburb further away from us and less convenient, but convinced and convicted that this is where they wanted to serve.

[13 : 31] That this was the ministry that God was calling them to. We are surrounded by witnesses who are living out their faith in the day-to-day.

And faith is a shared journey towards a future hope. You're not required to hold on to hope in the difficult circumstances by yourself. That's what was so great watching the Fitzroy family.

It's what's so great watching in so many of our lives and situations is that when we are struggling, God provides the encouragement and support, not within ourselves, but within the cloud of witnesses.

He gives us models of what it looks like to persevere. He gives us brothers and sisters who bear with us. This is the point of chapter 11. All of these witnesses are on the same journey of faith.

That's why they can be an encouragement for us. And so faith lived out demands that we surround ourselves with the people of God, with witnesses to faith.

[14 : 35] It demands that we gather, that we invest relationally in one another, that we benefit from this community, but also that we seek to be a benefit to this community.

Because faith has one goal, heaven. So it's uncompromising and undivided in its commitment to getting there. And in our quest for heaven, faith recognizes that we are stronger together.

Faith is surrounded. The second thing is faith is unhindered. We must throw off anything that gets in the way. As a younger man, I used to go on Christian camps for one reason and one reason only.

Girls. From the moment that I arrived at registration, I would begin to prowl the other campers looking for pretty girls. I would then proceed to place myself in the proximity of pretty girls.

I would then proceed to do whatever I could to make said pretty girls notice me. And you know, there was a lot of girls in the youth ministry that I went to, so sometimes this was quite a big task.

[15 : 44] But one camp, I got particularly ambitious. Now, you guys might know that I'm not somebody who has really ever in my life struggled particularly with self-confidence.

But, unfortunately, my self-perception and reality have not always lined up. And so, from where I was standing, I would strut around registration thinking that, you know, Brad Pitt is gracing the halls of camp registration and that any girl with functional eyes is struggling to control herself.

In reality, I was a little chubby. I had a bold haircut and a goofy smile. In my perception, I was very smooth. I was irresistible to the opposite sex.

I had all the lines ready to go. But in reality, if any of these girls actually talked to me, all I could manage was, hi. Hi. But, in spite of reality, one year, I got particularly bold.

I spotted a gorgeous girl at registration. I found out her name, Alicia. She was in year 10. I was in year 8. To make matters worse, my older brother was in year 8 and he was actually all the things that I thought I was.

[17:00] He was attractive and he was smooth with the ladies. But, remember, I hadn't realised that there was barriers like that. I was Brad Pitt. So, eyes on the prize I dedicated myself for the seven days of that camp to pursuing this older woman.

I was so committed that at mealtimes I sat with her and her friends instead of my friends. When it came to picking activities, I chose what she was doing instead of what I wanted to do.

Craft was much more exciting than abseiling. In fact, for that week, I pretended to learn how to whistle because she couldn't whistle and that gave us something to do together.

I mean, come on, who can't whistle? I even wrote her little love notes and no self-respecting 14-year-old writes any notes, let alone love notes, that other people might find out about.

But I was single-minded in my commitment to the goal of getting this older woman to like me and be my girlfriend. Now, unfortunately, that was my only goal. So after I succeeded, and I did succeed, we started dating for a whopping three weeks and then broke up because I hadn't figured out what happened after I managed to convince her to go out with me.

[18:13] Now, a quick caveat on this story. I'm not endorsing going on camps to pick up girls. The moral of the story is not try harder when you're trying to get a boyfriend or girlfriend or husband or wife.

That's not what I'm saying. The point is, when you really want something, when it is first priority for you, you need to forego anything that could slow you down from achieving your goal.

For us as Christians, faith defines our goal. Heaven is the destination. That is what we are being prepared for and every step between now and then exists as an opportunity to serve God.

Every step is an opportunity to be satisfied in God, to enjoy Him and to point other people to see how satisfying He is. And so, we've got to throw off anything that gets in the way of that.

Anything that gets in the way of us serving or enjoying our God. Anything that steals our affection from Him. One of the questions we need to be asking about everything we do is, does this thing help me love God or does it hinder my love for God?

[19:32] Does it grow my affection for Jesus or does it steal my affection from Jesus? There is no neutral category when it comes to the way that we spend our time and our energy and our money.

It either drives us forward in our love for God and our enjoyment of Him or it holds us back. By definition if it's not helping it's hindering.

And so we need to let go of sins that we're holding on to. Maybe secret sins that we've kind of conceded on. You know the ones that we've kind of gone oh look I'm a sinful person I'm not perfect yet so it's just part of the deal.

Throwing those things off means confessing them to God and trusting Him when He says that Jesus has died and risen and that's enough to wash you clean and to transform your heart.

This isn't about being perfect but it's about being on a journey an ongoing process of trusting God to keep washing you and keep forgiving you by His grace.

[20 : 39] Plus all this throwing off as well as wrestling with sin and things that are a waste of our time includes letting go of the fear and insecurity that sometimes holds us back from serving God in the ways that He wants.

Now I know that we don't actually have the ability to switch off that part of the brain that freaks out sometimes but what we do have is the opportunity to take that fear or that anxiety or that uncertainty and take it to the cross.

What we do have is a cloud of witnesses who are maybe going through the same processes but have learnt how to swap that fear and uncertainty for the confidence in what God has done and in His power instead of in our own power.

We can trade our fear for the confidence that comes from knowing that we have a Saviour who has proved that He's more powerful than anything we will ever face. And when we're free from that hindrance the third thing that our faith will do is release us to run.

Again Hebrews 12 end of verse 1 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.

[22 : 01] Run the race. Faith is not half hearted or apathetic or lethargic. Faith is undivided and committed and energetic and enthusiastic but it's really important that you run your race.

when I was growing up I grew up with a group of guys getting disciplined as a teenager and some of those guys were clearly impressive people.

I had a friend who happened to be into comics but that masked an ability that he had to basically inhale books. He's now a minister and the time in his life has come where he's starting to output some of the books that he has been inhaling for the first half of his life.

He's just recently published his first book on leadership. If you're a Christian leader in any capacity I recommend it but that's not the point of what I'm saying. He has published this book and it's a significant work and he's a significant guy and he will be known in church and ministry and Christian circles going forward as somebody who will do something significant for God by faith.

But what I wanted to read to you was the second page. It says this, for Stu and Tim, the two men God used to bring me to Jesus, build me up in him and send me out for him.

[23 : 23] At a stretch the ministry nerds amongst you might have some idea who Tim is. He's a kind of fairly significant youth pastor but if not that's fine too. But no one here will know who Stu is.

No one here will know that Stu spent week after week after week while we were in high school sewing into Craig and explaining who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him. No one here will know that Stu still calls Craig and me and a bunch of the other guys that he disciplined when we were teenagers to encourage us to continue to trust God and live by faith.

faith. But the key here is Stu has still done something significant by faith. It's a different path to the one that Craig who wrote the book is running but he's still running his race.

He still sacrificed hours when he was at university and in his early marriage and during his family to sow into ungrateful teenage boys like me and like Craig and like a few others.

faith doesn't turn Christians into clones. It doesn't take away everything about you that's unique and say we all have to do the same things. Sure there's some stuff that we're all called to like loving people who don't know Jesus, being humble, being generous but in terms of the specifics of the race that God has designed for you, it's your race.

[24 : 47] just like in chapter 11, Noah had a race, Abraham had a race, Enoch had a race. Did you notice that Moses' parents got a mention in chapter 11?

They're not big players in the Bible other than getting a mention here but they did the thing that was required. They were bold at a time that boldness was required, they protected their son and then God went on to use Moses significantly.

Some of us might be called to by faith live in singleness in a way that honors God. Some of us might be called by faith to work significantly in caring for those who are desperate and in need in our society.

Some of us might be called by faith to honor God in the corporate world or in artistic expression or even in ministry. But the key is wherever God has placed you, whatever he has put in your life, get rid of what is slowing you down so that you can run.

Confess the sin that you're holding on to and being distracted by. Trust Jesus to forgive you and run with the energy and freedom that he has won for you. I wonder where in your life tonight God is asking you to trust his promises more fully.

[26 : 08] I mean are there any areas of your life, maybe it's your job, maybe it's home, maybe it's social, whatever it is, are there any areas where trusting Jesus makes no difference right now?

And if so, just think for a minute, what difference would it make if you did trust him there? Faith is about stepping out of your comfort zone.

It's about dreaming beyond what you're capable of within yourself and chasing that dream because you believe and trust the promises that God has made. Lastly and most importantly, faith is eyes on Jesus.

Do you ever wish that you knew the future? I mean wouldn't life be easier if you knew how it was going to end up, take stress out of those decisions, out of those uncertainties?

Well you do. Listen to Hebrews 12 again, verse 2. 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.

[27 : 25] Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. See, not only does Jesus make it possible for us to get to heaven, he actually walks the path in front of us to show us what the path is, to show us what it looks like.

When it says he's the perfecter of our faith, that means he has walked in it, he has lived by faith. He trusted his heavenly father. He knows the joy, the hope that we hold on to.

And so he obeys unconditionally everything that his father asks of him. And now he sits at the right hand of God in heaven, exalted with all authority in heaven and on earth.

I mean, can you imagine what it would have been like to be Jesus? Facing torture, being mocked, ultimately being crucified. How does he keep walking that path willingly, by choice?

The answer is, he knew his future. He knew what God had promised.

[28 : 34] He knew that on the other side of his suffering, he would be exalted to the right hand. Hebrews chapter 6, a few chapters earlier, talks about the certainty of God's promises, about the absolute confidence we can have that God will deliver on everything that he has said he will do.

And it describes that hope, that trust in his promises, that faith, as an anchor for the soul. It's an anchor because it guarantees the finish line.

No matter how dark the circumstance gets, the anchor makes those circumstances bearable. It doesn't make life easy, but it gives you confidence to keep going.

It gives you a rock to stand on when the ground is getting uncertain. It gives you security in the storms to step out and live in light of the power of God. And it empowers you to live a significant life for Jesus, to do more than you're capable of in your own strength.

Faith is a certain future hope that transforms your uncertain present. It's a certain future anchor which makes a difference and has power for everything in your life now.

[29 : 52] And so the question for us tonight is, what are our eyes focused on? Are you focused on the things that are in your way?

The things you can't do, whether it's your own limitations or external factors? What would it look like if you fixed your eyes on Jesus, the all-powerful king, instead of all the reasons you can't?

What would it look like if you fixed your eyes on Jesus and the unmatched joy that's in him instead of the good but inferior things that he's given you? This round of activate, what ministry is God calling you to have a go at?

Where is he calling you to step out of your comfort zone and trust him and his power instead of your ability or your experience? What would God do in your life and in this church if we completely surrendered to him in faith?

If like Jesus, we fixed our eyes on the uncertain future hope and we're able to give up our own ambition and serve no matter the cost because that's faith.

[31 : 19] It's a certain future hope that transforms our uncertain present, that has power in our uncertain present. Faith is security in God.

It's confidence that he will look after us because he has said he will and so we can stop chasing our own agenda. We can stop spending our lives trying to look after ourselves because God has promised to do that for us.

Paul expresses faith in Philippians 1 when he says, Paul can say that because he is secure and confident that when he finishes the race, whenever that is, his finish line is heaven.

He's confident that no matter what happens, he will be welcomed into the warm embrace of his heavenly father. God is faithful. He has a path for you, a faith-filled journey for his purposes and his kingdom.

So throw off sin. Throw off anything that entangles and fix your eyes on Jesus. Dream.

[32 : 48] Imagine. And watch what God will do. Amen. And watch what life is. Amen. So that's how I see it. Amen.

Amen. Amen.