

Following Until The End

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[0 : 00] One of the major disappointments for me over the last year of COVID-19 restrictions has been on two occasions, a half marathon that I was preparing for was cancelled, but I had done all the preparation. I had did three months of gruelling preparation. I had run the 22.1 kilometre distance twice while training, and it was very hard, and it was particularly difficult when those events were cancelled. It was particularly difficult doing the 22.1 kilometres by myself.

It was especially hard to keep pressing on when I hit that wall of physical and especially mental exhaustion at about the 17 kilometre mark. As we open up the book of Hebrews at the end of this vision series, the letter to Hebrews pitches the Christian walk, the walk of Christian discipleship, the journey of Christian discipleship, as a running race. It's a running race, a long running race, a journey that the first recipients of this letter were struggling with. Hebrews 11 and 12 are crucial for us to understand the message of Hebrews. You see, Hebrews is written to a bunch of Christians who are on this road of journeying with Jesus, seeking to follow him, but who had settled into the world and started to drift through life without focus, without vigilance, and without energy. At the beginning of the letter, chapter 2 verses 1 and chapter 3, the writer declares, we must pay more closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift from it. And then he writes, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

So the writer here is dealing with the disease of drifting, of neglect. It had crept into this church, and these Christians are growing careless, spiritual lazy, and negligent. Chapters 11 and 12 are written to motivate his friends to keep the faith, to keep pushing forward, pressing on, to keep running the race of discipleship. And they are written for us too. And so with these verses, these three verses, we close out our vision series for this year and of our launch of our ministry intent over the next five years. The key objective, as you've heard already and several times throughout this whole series, is to see 65% of St Paul's identifying much growth in faith through this church by the end of 2025.

That is, we as a church want to run in such a way that the majority of us are growing as disciples of the Lord Jesus. The majority of us are growing in confidence in God. So here's where I want to head today. Three challenges, they're there in the St Paul's app. You want to grab that and open up.

Number one, run the race of faith. Number two, run it well. Number three, run to the finish and get the prize. So first of all, run the race of faith. To get to Hebrews 12, you've got to go through 11. So let me just launch into 11 a little bit. Hebrews 11 is known by some as the faith hall of fame.

What the writer does in chapter 11 is he overwhelms the readers with a list of those who have run the race before them and got to the end, got to the finish line. And he sweeps through the whole Old Testament, starts with creation. He mentions the faith of Abel and the faith of Enoch and Noah.

[4 : 07] And when he reaches Abraham, he just slows down and takes a little bit of time to focus on the faith of Abraham. He says that Abraham left everything behind that he had in order to go to a land that he knew nothing about. He picked up everything and walked away to a new land. And he did that because God called him to do it. He had faith and he had confidence in God. He lived out his days in a foreign land without the support of family and friends and his tribe because he had faith in the God who had promised him a better future. When he was very old, God promised that he would in fact have a son.

It was unthinkable he was that old. But Abraham had faith that what God said, that God had the power to pull it off and a son was born. And after his son Isaac was born, God said the unthinkable to him and told him to sacrifice this son to God. And Abraham was willing to do it because God was the one who called him to do it. Even though it seemed like total insanity. He was willing to do it because he had the faith in the God who had called it. He knew that God could even bring him back from the dead if that's what was needed. The other significant figure here where he slows down and

focuses on demonstration of great faith is Moses. He's a man whose life was characterized by faith in God, despite how hard it got. His faith meant giving up what would have been a wealthy and a comfortable life in the palace in Egypt. His faith meant that he was often very alone in his leadership of God's people. And the examples of faith from then on throughout the Old Testament, it just doesn't end.

The writer gets to the end where he goes, you know, like, you know, for time I've got to do just a flying summary of all the highlights. Goes to verse 32. And what more shall I say? I do not have time to talk about Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel and the prophets who through faith conquered kingdoms, admitted to justice, gained what was promised, who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword whose weakness was turned to strength and it became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they might gain a better resurrection. In other words, there's no shortage of incredible examples of faith.

And this list here in Hebrews 11 is amazingly diverse collection of people and demonstrations of faith. And what marks each of them out is that they had faith in God. They had total confidence in God.

It was faith in God despite what he was calling them to do. See verse 36? Some faced jeers and flogging while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.

[7 : 09] The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground. What's also remarkable about this chapter is that it doesn't just give us examples of people of faith. It also gives us insight into what their faith actually is, what faith is.

And there's three things. The first is that faith is not something that exists independently. It's not something that you achieve independently. It's not something you can buy from a supermarket shelf or something like that. Faith is always faith in. Faith is a word that gets used even today in our secular age. It's not uncommon for someone who perhaps doesn't believe in God to say, well, you just have to have faith. When they've got no other answers, no other solutions, unsure of what the future is, you've just got to have faith. And when the word faith is used like that, what they really mean is, I'm crossing my fingers and I'm just hoping the best. Wishful thinking. And so in our secular age, faith is regarded as the opposite of facts. In public debate, faith is seen as the opposite of reason, logic, science, and facts. It's the opposite. So when you want to reject the research, you just have faith is what you have. But biblical faith is not what you have when you don't have rationality and facts. That is not the Bible's view of faith. And it's not the kind of faith that we see demonstrated consistently in the scriptures. When the Bible refers to faith, it always refers to faith in something. It is trusting in the facts. It is stepping out with logic and reason. It is agreeing with the God who has revealed himself and the way things actually are.

The faith that these Old Testament people had was faith in God. This is faith in the God who made the world. This is the faith in the God who has consistently proven himself to be good and right and true.

It's faith in the God who is powerful and able to achieve his purposes and proven again and again and again to do so. This is faith in the God who is able to save.

This is faith in the God who does what he promises. How do we know? How do we know that at the end of the Christian life, there is a resurrection hope and there is life forever? Because historically in this world, Jesus rose from the dead.

[10 : 22] Historical fact. That's how we know. The one who was dead has come back alive and promises the same for those who run the race of discipleship. It's faith in that historical fact.

Biblical faith is faith in God. The second thing that we notice here is that real faith shows itself in actions despite the consequences. All the people mentioned here in Acts 11 had a faith that caused them to act.

Noah had faith in what God said about flooding the earth and dealing with sin and he built, therefore, he built a really big boat.

Abraham believed God and he picked up his family and he moved to a foreign land, a promised land. Moses trusted God, so he gave up the life in the palace with Pharaoh and he led God's people out of Egypt miraculously.

He confronted Pharaoh. With each one of these people, their faith in God was a faith in the God who spoke, who shaped what, and this God shaped what they did and how they lived and that is what genuine faith does.

[11 : 43] That is, faith is not some inner feeling. Faith is confidence in the God who's revealed himself, of who God is, what he says, and what he does.

Faith is based on that knowledge and experience of God's faithfulness that results in God's confidence. Faith is based on that knowledge and experience of God's faithfulness. Faith is based on that knowledge and experience of God's faithfulness.

Faith is based on that knowledge and experience of God's faithfulness. The final thing we see here is that faith always looks forward to the future with hope.

That's the definition, in fact, of what we're given, what faith is, in chapter 11, verse 1. Now, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

This is what the ancients were commended for. That is, faith is not, I just hope it works out, I really hope it works out. How can you be sure and certain?

[12 : 42] Because you have confidence in the God and what he's promised. Because he's got a track record of coming through. Let me just say it one more time.

That is why communing with God in his word four or more a week is so, so crucial for us growing in faith.

You don't build God confidence. You don't grow in faith unless you are being reminded again and again and again and again and again and again.

How great and awesome and trustworthy he is and how he consistently fulfills his promises throughout history. Unless you've got your face in the Bible and seeing that consistently, you don't grow in faith.

Secondly, the second thing here is to run the race of faith well.

[13 : 50] Following a clear demonstration of lived-out confidence of God from those in the past, the writer then here calls these Christians with a challenge in chapter 12, verse 1.

The word therefore at the beginning of chapter 12 connects the history lesson with the application. 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.

Now, I'm of the view that Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1 to 3, is the application for the whole letter of Hebrews. That is, that therefore, at the beginning of chapter 12, is not just about chapter 11, it's about the whole first 11 chapters.

And I think that the main take-home action point of the whole book of Hebrews is that three-letter command in verse 1, run, run.

[15 : 06] Everything else supports it, explains it, gives motivation for it. Run the race of faith which has been set before you. Run it. Endure, persevere, run, fight, be alert, be strengthened, don't drift, don't neglect, don't be sluggish, don't stroll, don't meander, don't wander aimlessly, don't take your eternal security for granted.

Run, as in a race with a finish line, with everything for eternity hanging on you crossing that finish line. Run. Run the race of faith.

Follow Jesus in everything on the basis of Jesus' spectacular death and resurrection and ascension. Show your confidence in God in the way the saints of Hebrews did and just lived it out. And to do that well, we have to heed the two instructions which are in verse 1. It says, Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

Take the last one first. The easiest definition of sin is attitudes and actions where we choose to live life our way without reference to God.

[16 : 33] And contrary to modern thinking, the life of sin does not result in freedom it actually results in enslavement.

You are not set free. You are not liberated. Sin entangles. It coils around you like a python and it constantly requires you to sacrifice for it.

Constantly. It trips you up. It enslaves you. It sends you crashing to the pavement in the same way that if you decided to go on a run with your shoelaces tied.

You could, you know, crawl along for a bit. As soon as you try to put some pace up, bang, you are face planted onto the pavement.

So don't ever think that it won't happen to you. Don't ever think that you've got your sin under control. As 1 Corinthians 10, 12 says, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

[17 : 39] But city is not just high profile failures. It is insidious and it's subtle.

A secret habit. It's a character trait that you have just got comfortable with. Anger. Grumbling. Greed. Gossip. Judgmentalism. Selfishness. The Puritan Thomas Watson urged followers of Jesus to develop what he called a holy hatred of sin.

We must develop this if we're going to run the race of perseverance well. But we're also instructed here to lay aside not only the sin which entangles us, but also it says everything that hinders. That is, every weight, every obstacle. Things that in themselves may not be sinful. But they do slow us down.

[18 : 48] So last year when I was training for a half marathon, I didn't wear what I'm wearing this morning. In fact, when I went for a 5K run yesterday morning, I didn't wear what I'm currently wearing this morning.

And this passage calls us, if we're going to run the race of faith well, we have to strip off. We've got to take the layers off. It says here, get rid of everything that is going to slow you down. Everything that hinders. Quite literally what that means is every single weight. One translation puts it like this.

Let us strip off everything that hinders us. And the imagery in the first century Palestine is striking.

And the imagery that the writer the Hebrews picks up here is very striking.

Because it is used, this language is used in the first century for athletes running in Olympic Games.

And what runners in the Olympic Games in the first century did was that they ran literally naked.

[19 : 59] And... Oh no, sorry. I do want to preach again. They got rid of anything that held them back.

Anything that hindered them. Every single weight. Everything that weighed them down was stripped off. And Christians are called to do the same metaphorically.

Do exactly the same. Now, let me be clear. This command here is absolutely revolutionary.

Absolutely revolutionary. This is very helpful for the religious person.

This is very helpful for the legalist amongst us who wants to live by boundaries and rules and stuff like that. Because what it does is it shows us that the fight of faith, the race of the Christian life, is not fought well by asking what's wrong with it.

What's wrong with this? What's wrong with that? But... But... by asking another question as well. Is it in the way?

[21 : 11] Is it slowing me down? Is it in the way of greater faith, greater love, greater purity, greater courage, greater humility, greater patience, greater self-control?

Is it a sin is one question to ask, but it's not the only question they ask? We must also be asking the question of everything in our life and our lifestyles.

Does it help me run? Is it in the way? Is it weighing me down? I've been mightily helped by having my very categories in life changed in this way, in the way I live.

And I commit it to you. Do not ask. Do not ask of your music, your movies, your parties, your habits, your friends, your hobbies, your career, your retirement, your relationships, your investments, your everything.

What's wrong with it? But ask the question, does it help me run the race? Does it help me run for Jesus? Hebrews 12 verse 1 is a command to look at your life, to think hard about what you are doing, to get ruthless with what stays and what goes.

[22 : 25] We are reminded here that of a simple lifestyle to strip back our lives and to be uncluttered as disciples of Jesus and travel light.

And so here's what I'm suggesting. Pick a day, half a day, a few hours, whatever it takes. Get away by yourself. Get away from the house. Get away from the phone. Get away from the TV, the radio, the chores.

Get away from other people. Get away from work. Take a Bible, a pen, and a piece of paper and plan your run with Jesus for the next year and between now and 2025. And on that piece of paper, put two columns.

One at the top called entangling sins. These are the idols of your heart. These are the treasures that are pushing Jesus out from being the treasure of your life.

Things like approval of others, materialism, my work, my family allegiance, being an idolized parent, being in control, having power, comfort, achievement, religion, individualism, image, suffering, helping others.

[23 : 30] Whatever it is, it's an idol of your heart. And note on the other column the weights, the encumbrances, the seemingly innocent things that are not condemned explicitly but you know are holding you back in the race of faith of love and strength and holiness and courage and freedom.

Note the ways that you make subtle provision for these hindrances. The computer games, the hidden alcohol, the chocolate, the television, the movies, the work, the hobbies, the mobile phones, the novels, the people who weaken you.

What you'll notice is that one or two of those columns combined you'll discover they are the things that are stopping you from doing four or more. They're the things getting in the way of you pursuing Jesus more.

Note the times that are wasted. Note the time that's thrown away. When you've made all those notes pray your way through them and formulate a plan of dismantling those hindrances and resisting those sins and breaking the old, old habits that you've become really comfortable with. Then share it with your community group. Some of what you've resolved and get them to pray for you. Find someone who you can trust and ask them to check in on you and support you as you deal with those things.

[25 : 24] Let me just... Today... In other words, you can walk out of this building and you can easily just drift.

Right from now you can drift. Don't drift. Even today don't drift. Don't drift from this moment right now what's being preached in God's word into Sunday afternoon and forget it.

Don't drift. Don't even drift today. Don't meander. Don't wander. Run today. Don't drift away. Before this day is over choose that moment where you're going to run your plan.

Plan your run with Jesus. Thirdly, run to the finish and get the prize. As we run the race of faith we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses cheering us on.

Literally a great host of people a multitude who have run the race and have crossed the finish line and received the prize. And these people are not just spectators they are overcomers.

[26 : 33] Each bear witness to the hardship and the triumphs and to the final prize. But there is one. There is one amongst all that cloud of witnesses that we must transfix our gaze on.

Verse 2 The term to fix our eyes on Jesus is a term that literally means to look away from everything else.

to be transfixed to look away from everything else. This is a firmly fixed gaze on Jesus as if success is totally dependent upon him.

And Jesus in amongst this great cloud of witness is the perfect example. He is our forerunner. First of all in the Garden of Gethsemane he had complete confidence in God and he says to God not my will be done but yours.

Secondly his faith translated into actions. He was willing to endure the cross. Thirdly his faith was based on what lay ahead the future hope. It says for the joy set before him he endured the cross.

[27 : 58] But he is more than just an example of faith. He is the author and the perfecter of our faith. That is he's not only the one who is amongst the cloud of witnesses he wrote the book on what genuine faith is and he's completed it for us.

He's the one who brings our faith into being and he finishes it for us. Jesus' entire life was the embodiment of trust in his father.

Where we fail every day he didn't. he perfectly obeyed. He lived the perfect life that we never can live and he trusted God all the way to the cross.

He died the death that we should have died. His obedience took him to the cross of shame the shame that we should have received the rejection that we should have received for our imperfection for our meandering and dawdling and wandering or taking different paths in life.

And he did that so that we could receive the accolades and the praises if we have run the race in perfect obedience. Friends, it is so essential for your discipleship that you always have the gospel in front of you.

[29 : 24] You know, this 525 is not about you pulling your socks up and trying a bit harder. It's about growing in faith in Jesus Christ.

God confidence. Our tendency is to look at the list of names in Hebrews chapter 11 and we pass them on the board of heroes of the faith. And they are.

And yet even Abraham and Sarah failed God often. Rahab was a prostitute. Jacob was a schemer and a deceiver. Samson was constantly falling to sexual temptation.

He did not think with his brain at all. All men and women of faith but every single one of them deeply floored with clay feet. They all wavered and they did it often.

Hebrews 11 is a catalogue of imperfect saints who made many serious mistakes grace but they all finished the race with faith.

[30 : 35] Even Samson in the end finished the race in faith. They received God's free gift of forgiveness and grace and they finished the race.

They might have suffered consequences for their failures but by God's grace they finished the race. These imperfect saints like the rest of us were in fact the joy that was set before Jesus.

That is his future joy the joy that was set before him the joy that meant he scorned the shame of the cross. What was that joy? Let me quote biblical scholar Leon Morris.

He looked right through the cross to the coming joy the joy of bringing salvation to those he loved. That was his joy.

You and I are his joy. His victory is the guarantee of our victory. His joy is our joy. All of us who are disciples are part of his reward.

[31 : 39] He has given us the gifts to ensure that we finish the race too. We have his word. As we've been reminded through this series, we have his word, his presence every step of the way in his spirit.

We have fellow runners to spare us on when we hit that emotional wall, that spiritual wall, but more importantly, we have the cross.

His cross, where he crossed the finish line, and he guarantees our prize. Jesus saves us, and he gets us started on this journey.

That's what we saw right at the very beginning. We began this series with Jesus, the one who rescues us, brings us from the paths of life that we have followed, the broad ways that lead to destruction.

He's brought us back onto, by his grace, onto this pathway of Christian discipleship. We discover he's just not the beginning of it. He's the enabler for the whole journey.

[32 : 36] He's the one who is there with us. He's at the end. He's the goal. He's the prize of the life of Christian discipleship. The race of the Christian life, the journey of discipleship does, however, require perseverance from us.

That's what this Bible passage is calling us to, to run with perseverance. We must persevere if we are to finish and receive the prize. For you young people in the room, put down your phones and listen to this.

especially young people, everyone, because we're all marinating in the same culture, but for young people especially, you exist in a culture, in an era, in a time and space, where you value the quick fixes.

Maximum results with minimum effort. We exist in a culture where we are flippant. We flip from one thing to the next thing, one promising solution to the next promising solution.

We shift from church to church. Our culture encourages what American writer Gore Vidal once described as a passion for the immediate and the casual.

[33 : 56] We are easily bored, we are easily distracted, and we cannot grow in faith and persevere in Christian discipleship if that culture that we marinate in dominates our outlook on life.

The best description that I can have of the Christian life comes from atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

He saw Christian discipleship with absolute clarity even though himself was no friend of Christianity. He wrote it is the necessity of long obedience in the same direction.

Nietzsche, what insight. Unfortunately, you didn't live it. it powerfully describes the pathway of Christian discipleship. This is the life of meaning and purpose.

This is the life as God intended. Do not chase pale imitations. Do not be distracted by shadows.

Persevere. We may reach the finish line limping or leaping.

[35 : 16] We may even collapse over the line, but all true disciples will make it. such is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. But we will cross the finish line because of the means that he has given us.

And we will cross the finish line more strongly, more purposely, with greater joy, with greater anticipation as we fix our gaze more and more on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The key objective for Follow 25 is to see 65% of St. Paul's identifying much growth in faith through the ministry of this church. That is the majority of us growing more and more in confidence in God in the next five years.

Oh, my goodness, how I would navigate the complexity of life if I was far more confident in God.

Young people, you've got a whole life ahead of you. You will navigate the complexity of life in this world fundamentally more easily as you grow in confidence in God.

Our vision is about what we are seeking to do as a church over the next five years, but fundamentally it's about you. You, the individual.

[36 : 39] Don't sit back and go, well, you know, we've been to see what happens in the next five years, see where the leadership goes and how we, this, this is about you, this is about your journey, your life, your faith in the Lord Jesus.

This is about you growing in confidence in God. This plan is about your journey with Jesus. So don't meander from this moment.

Don't drift. Don't wander. This plan is about your next step in faith. So what is it?

That's it.