

New Years Day Service

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2014

Preacher: Rev Kenneth I Macleod

[0 : 0 0] the beginning of chapter 12. 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, and so on.

As we know, New Year is often a strange time, which we seem to be at this point where, as it were, there's a straddling of what has gone in the past and what lies ahead of us. Of course, every moment of every day is similar because we're just continuing in time, minute by moment, and so it goes on. But there are points where we kind of stop. It's a time where we reflect, and it's also a time when we anticipate, looking back and looking forward. And this section here that we have is doing exactly that, because we find that the apostle is looking back to all these great men and women of faith, but he's also looking forward to the way that the Christian is journeying on and moving on in this world. And so the apostle has given us this marvelous list. It's not an exclusive. It's not a complete list of all the great men and women of faith, but he lists many of them, and they are listed not because of any other virtues that are in them. They were all, they had their faults, their failings, their disappointments in life. There were people who had good times and bad times, or people who did some wonderful things, and some of them did some terrible things. But the one thing that distinguished them and set them apart was their faith, a faith that continued, a faith that endured, a faith that was obvious as he journeyed throughout this world. That's why they're listed here. They were men and women of faith, men and women who endured hardships and sorrows and struggles and trials and losses, men and women who really, really suffered in this world. But the one thing that continued was their faith, their faith endured. And so that's what the apostle is highlighting here, and that's what faith does, because it's all very well saying, oh, I live by faith, and that's how we do. We don't live by sight, we live by faith. But when there's faith, faith is going to be tested. And when our faith is tested, then many of the supports and the props and the things that hold us up in life normally and naturally can sometimes be taken from us. These times are tough, because I know we live by faith, but so often we rely upon one another. That's the way we live. There's this, we live in community, we live in families, we live in community, we live in community, we live in community, we live in community, we live in our families and in our families and in our friends and in systems and different things. And when these things are broken or these things are shaken or these things are removed, it's difficult. It throws us.

But that's what often happens in the life of faith, where we are brought to places, to points, where there is nothing and there is nobody but the Lord alone. And the Lord does that deliberately, because where there is faith, faith has to be strengthened and faith has to be proved. And so that's one of the things that we find so often in the Bible. And the apostle then, he talks about this great cloud of witnesses. That's how he describes all these people that he's been talking about, as this great cloud of witnesses. Now, you and I know that there are certain Christians that when you're in their company, they make you feel good to be a Christian. There's something about them, there's an enthusiasm, there's a passion, and there's a faith that is obvious. And you see the reality of faith within them. And it encourages you, just as a little something in you and for you that helps you. And in a sense, that's kind of what the apostle has been doing here. He's highlighting all these people who have gone before and held them up as examples of men and women, yes, despite their faults and failings, who continued despite everything that happened to them in this world. They continued on, they endured, and their faith remained. And so, of course, this is a great encouragement to us.

But of course, these people, they have gone. They've moved on. They've departed to be with Christ. But we don't forget them. They made their mark. They left their impression. They left, as it

were, the footprint behind of their life. You and I know, I'm sure all of us, remember Christians who have gone, who left a lasting impression upon us. It's a great thing to leave a legacy behind where your life so influenced or so spoke. You know how it says in the Word of God, dead yet speaking? And that is often true with people, people of faith, people who their life did something to you and for you positively. Their influence, although they are gone, their influence is still there upon you. And so the apostle is reminding us about this great cloud of witnesses who have gone. And I often think that they're not that far away. The Bible talks about three heavens. It talks about the heavens where the birds fly. It talks about the heavens which is where they would go right up into space and so on. And the third heaven as being the abode, the place of God. But I tend to think that that heaven is not somewhere away beyond the reaches of outer space.

[6 : 34] I believe it's an awful lot closer to us than ever we realize. Where it is, I have no idea. But I don't think it's as far away as often we think. And the question is often asked, are those who have gone ahead, are they aware of what's happening with us here? Well, I have to say, I don't really know. We do know that there is joy, certainly amongst the angels, when a sinner comes in faith and repentance to the Lord. How much those in glory know, I don't know. But I know, like for an instance in Revelation, there are questions asked, who are these? Those are the ones who have come out of great tribulation. So that there is, it would almost indicate that there is a questioning here and there. But the emphasis here is not so much, I think it's quite obvious, it's not so much about the cloud of witnesses looking at us, it's more as we look at them.

And so the apostle highlights their faith to encourage us, but that's not where we are to stop. He highlights their faith, but he goes on to tell us, A, how to run, and B, where our main focus should be, that our focus has to be and must be upon Jesus, who is the founder and perfecter of faith. And there is nowhere else to look in this world. Looking to Jesus is a great command in the Scripture, and it is the great duty that is required of us as we go on. In order for a person to be saved, they must look to Jesus, look unto me and be you saved all the ends of the earth. That's a command, that's a great invitation of the Gospel. But you know, when we look to Jesus and see Him and discover Him, we don't stop looking. It's not something we did in order to be converted, and then we stop looking. We continue looking every single day. That's how we move, that's how we run.

We'll see that in a moment. Jesus is our focus, and has to be, or else we're not running really at all. Now, we see here that the Christian life is looked upon as a race, and that, of course, a very fitting description. And as we know, every race has a starting point, and we believe the starting point for us is when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, when we embrace Jesus as our Savior.

[9 : 12] We begin this race. Now, our race, of course, is very different to our walk. Again, we've got to remember that the Christian faith is likened to our walk, but that's not the point here. It's not our jog. It's our race. It is something that requires dedication, requires commitment, it requires effort, it requires endurance. When an athlete is training for anything, there's no point in being very fast if you can't keep going. You need to have endurance along with your speed and your stamina and your strength and all these different things. They're working at all these things, and so it is in the spiritual kingdom as well. There has to be this sense of being able to keep going. It's not about little quick spurts here and there, and just we run here and we run there. It's our race. It requires effort. That doesn't mean that we're running well every single day. But we never really stop.

Although we may slow down, there are times we may wander off the path. Times we're not running the way that we should. Sometimes we might even be running on the spot. But the fact of the matter is we're still running because faith never stops. Faith is not something that comes and goes. Yes, there can be great faith, and in the same person there can be little faith with regard to our experience and experimental faith. Jesus said that to the disciples. Sometimes he said, O ye of little faith. And yet there were other times in our lives they demonstrated great faith.

But the fact of the matter is there is faith, and faith will keep us going. But also we see that this is a race. As we said, it requires activity, and as we say it requires this ability to keep going. Because there's lots of stuff to try and stop us going. Because the moment we begin to run, remember we run by grace. It's by grace you are saved through faith. Not a works, not what we do ourselves. And this is a race of grace. And if we're not running by grace, we're actually not running at all. But it's by grace. And it's a struggle. Because this divine, this principle of new life that has come within is met with so much that resists. Because what is there naturally does not want God. The old passion was also running, but running away from God. That's what Adam did at the very

beginning.

And that's what loads of people are still doing. They're running away. They're still running. But they're not running this race. They're running in the opposite direction. But when God comes into a person's life, he turns us around. That's what really conversion is. Turns us around. So that we're not running away, we're running to him. And so it's this race of faith. But it's a struggle. It'll sap us to a, it'll take us to the very edge. And then we also see that this is a race that is actually set before us. It's something that has been set out for us. It's not something that we chose. It's a Lord. We all could remember that. Remember how we've been dealing in John's gospel there. And we saw that all that the Father gives to me shall come to me. And him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out. We're following the Lord initially. The prime mover in everything is God. And he sets out this race for us. And some days we'll be taken into situations and along pathways that we didn't expect or want. And I so believe in the sovereignty of God that there are times when we look back over our lives, we say, oh, I wish that that period had not been. I wish I'd come to Jesus. Maybe we shouldn't say that if there are people here who aren't Christians. But the thing is, sometimes we look back and we say, oh, I wish I had. And yes, I can say that. I would say that of myself. I wish I'd become a Christian long before I had. And yet the amazing thing is in God's dealings and God's workings. God is working all these things that are before to be part of what we are now. God doesn't make mistakes. Although we may look at life as being really difficult and we're saying, what is happening? God is on the throne and God is in control. And he's working all things for his own glory and ultimately for our good. So it's our race that is set out for us. And it's on this pathway that we must run. And so we find then, it tells us a wee bit more specifically, how we ought to run this race. And we're told here that we're to run this race laying aside every weight, or let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely. Now, a weight, as we know, doesn't necessarily need to be something that is in and of itself sinful. It's just simply something that takes the edge of our faith. It might be something that's completely legitimate and right in itself, but it's something that is sidetracking us. You and I know that there are things within our lives that can be right and legitimate and proper, but they have taken over our life.

[15 : 31] And we know that they're slowing down our growth and grace, that we're not running as well as we used to. And what will slow you down might not slow me down and vice versa, but you know yourself, because we have to be honest with ourselves and examine our own life and our own heart and what we do. And that is what we have here. It's something or things that slow us down. Jesus, in his own sometimes very, very dramatic way, he highlights this very thing with regard to salvation. And remember where Jesus is actually saying, if your eye, remember your hand, remember what Jesus says, if your hand or foot offend you, cut them off and cast them from you. It's better to enter life lame or maimed rather than having two hands and two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

Now, nobody in their right mind would argue and say, well, a hand or a foot, it's not, it's not some, you have to say, they're not only justifiable, they're essential.

They're absolutely essential to life, a hand and a foot. If you lose your hand, if you even lose a finger, it's something you've got to cope with. It's difficult. Anything is difficult if we lose.

But a hand or a foot, as we say, is essential. And yet the point that Jesus is making is that things that are not only justifiable but essential to life can actually end up leading you to hell. It is reckoned that more people are lost through our wrong use of right things than of plunging headlong into deliberate sin, defiant sin, our wrong use of right things.

So we need to be really careful. This is what the emphasis is upon. Let not the good things, the blessings that God gives us in life, lead us astray from the Lord. Now, that's not saying it's easy because these are things that are important to our lives. And it's not saying that we've got to become negative in life and sort of say, right, got to get rid of everything. Because sometimes we can react like that and have this extreme right, that's it, everything's going. Well, the Lord doesn't say that. But He's saying to us, look, if something is slowing you down, and you know what it is, then it doesn't necessarily say that we've got to get rid of it altogether. But lay it aside. Don't give it its full. Make sure it is not taking over your life. So that's the first thing He says, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely to us. And I think here we're talking more about specific sins that we might be more prone to. And again, that's so different for different people. Because no two people are alike. For one person, it might be one particular thing, or it might be two or three things. That there's a particular weakness that you're prone to.

[19 : 00] Satan gets advantage over you so easily. It's a temptation that you find so hard to resist. It's something that has brought many tears from you. You have prayed often over it, and yet it's still something that you struggle with. I remember a man, he's not living now. He had a ferocious temper, a fearful temper. And along with that terrible temper, he sometimes used to say the most awful things, really hurtful things. And he was a good man. There was no question. He was a very consecrated Christian. But my word, he had this terrible temper. And sometimes I used to think, he just seems to, he hurt so many people. But one time he was over and he was visiting in the house.

And, you know, I was amazed what he said. He said, you have no idea the grief my temper causes me. I have wept before the Lord so often. I have repented. I have been so broken by it. And time and again, I go to the Lord asking for help. It was a weakness. It was, this is the way he was. And I, up to that point, didn't even think it bothered him. But it was something that bothered him no end. And I'm not saying it's a temper with you, but there's no doubt there are specific things that cause us problems. Well, we're being asked, we've got to deal with these things. And so we say we've got to run this race with endurance. We've got to, as they say, we've got to keep going. No Christian is in the Christian life for the long haul. We've got to realize that it's something where the Christian life is not for quitters. Now, I know that there are people who have some, they might have an emotional experience of some sort or another, and they go away. They fall for a wee while, and then they drift off. We all know how much it hurts when you see somebody drift away. When somebody who has been running with you for a wee while, and then stops running, it hurts. It's always hurt, hurts us when somebody stops running. Thing is, if there is faith, that passion will pick up again. Because even although they might, to us, not be running outwardly, there's still something going on. There is still a movement within. However low that movement is, however tiny that movement is, even although they're barely recognizing it themselves, it's still there. And the Lord will bring something or do something with it. It'll be rekindled, and the movement is obvious again. And you say, oh, there they are. I knew there was something still there. And so that's how faith, as we say, faith is something that just, it keeps going. And so we see that we are to run well by looking to Jesus. And again, it's so simple, in a sense, and yet it's so difficult. Because looking to Jesus is like Peter on the water, isn't it? Peter stepped out, because his eyes were fixed upon Jesus. And that sea became like a pavement to him, as long as his eyes were fixed upon Jesus. But the moment he began to think, hey, what am I doing? And when he heard the wind roaring, and he saw the splash and the surge of the sea, and he says, oh. And at that moment, other things, his focus was taken off Jesus. And he began to sink. And far too often, we're sinking Christians. We're struggling Christians. And we'll always struggle when our eyes are off Jesus. And sometimes, you know, we're so bad for trying to sort things out ourselves.

[23 : 17] And we hit into a problem. We hit into a difficulty. And sometimes as Christians, we're tired. And we even feel too tired to pray. Have you ever been in a situation where things, they're just, oh, it's difficult, and the day's not going well, and you're weary, and you feel too tired to pray. And you're almost saying, I'm going to, I'm just going to go through with this. I am what I am. And it's as if the Lord is looking down at you and saying, hey, come on. Get your focus right.

You're struggling. You're struggling. And you're just digging a hole for yourself more and more. You don't need to be there. Look up. Like Peter says, Lord, save me. We need to reach out again. We need to be asking the Lord daily for that grace and that help. And so we're to run looking to Jesus. Jesus, who is, we're told here, who is the founder and perfecter of our faith. Look at Jesus. How did he run? He ran the race as well. He ran a race that was set before him. And he never wavered of it. We've been looking at that in John's gospel. You remember how they came and they wanted to make him king?

Oh, there would have been a temptation there. Aye, you can have the crown without the cross. Have it the easy way. But no, he wasn't going to waver off the path. And so we've got to look at Jesus.

And you know, the great thing we've got to remember is that as Jesus ran the race that was set before him, and he ran by faith, looking to the Father, it's incredible. He lived in dependence upon the Father.

[25 : 00] Father. He is the author of faith. He is the founder of faith. How did he run that race? He was tempted. He was battered. He was slandered. He was mis-called. He was hungry. He was thirsty.

He went through every conceivable distressing situation in life. He was abandoned all on his own. He was flogged. He was vilified. He was abused. He was crucified. You name it, it happened to him. And yet he continued to run the race. And we are to look to him, look to this Jesus who never, ever, ever, ever stopped running. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. He enables us to believe. It's through him that we have faith. It is in him that we continue to have faith. He is our guide, our shepherd, our shield, our prince, our lover. He is everything to us.

And we see also that he was the one who endured the cross. His faith took him all the way, despising the shame. Jesus never, ever, ever did anything that embarrassed him. In other words, because he didn't sin, and because he had no sin, he never did anything that was shameful. And yet he bore our shame.

You know, it's an extraordinary thing, because he bore our guilt. And guilt, guilt causes shame. You know, you look at your life, and there are things, everybody, we've all done things we're ashamed of.

[26 : 47] Well, Jesus, it's terrible. He despised the shame. Because when you think even of his crucifixion, he was stripped, he was flogged, he was held out into the open, crucified on that cross. The most shameful, horrific death that the Roman citizens wouldn't keep for themselves. It was only for slaves. It was for enemies. Roman citizen wasn't put on the cross. It was so shameful. Yet Jesus is hanging there on the cross for you and for me, and he's despising that shame, even although he's taking it upon himself.

He did all that for you and for me. And we're told, look to him. Look to him. That's how we're to look. Look to this Jesus. But he didn't remain on the cross, and he is now 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. You know, when you're weary and faint-hearted, what do you do? You go to this Jesus who himself was wearied, who, as we were just talking about, he went through everything.

And you say to him, Lord, you know where I am right now. You know my pain and my difficulties. You know my struggle and my suffering. You know my temptations. You know all these things. And he's been touched with this fellow feeling, but not only does he know it. Lord, help me. And that's the simple faith. That's how we are to run, keeping going to him for that strength and grace and help in every time of need. Well, as we begin this year, let's make sure that we are all looking to this Jesus. If you have never looked before, make it, you know, people are always making resolutions, and people say, I can't keep my resolution. Well, I'll tell you the one resolution you have to make. And it's important for us is to say to yourself, I have to look to Jesus.

[29 : 10] See, time's going. It's the one thing we've got to get sorted in life is our standing with Jesus. Are you today looking to Jesus? Have you looked? Look unto me and be you saved. Have you looked? And if you have looked, then continue to keep looking. It's a way to be saved. It's a way to continue running.

And one day, be sure of this, those who have looked to Jesus by faith in this world will one day look on the face of the Savior that they have believed in and that they love here. They will look at him in all his glorious beauty. But you know more than that? You'll be like him. Isn't that wonderful?

That's what we're told in Scripture. Let's pray. O Lord, our God, we give thanks for this glorious gospel. We give thanks, O Lord, for the strength that you give us in all the trials and problems and difficulties that we face. We pray that we may continue to look to Jesus and receive from him strength and grace all the time. Lord, bless us and shine upon us with your love. Uphold us and keep us and direct us in the right way. Have mercy upon us and forgive us our many sins. Bless a cup of tea, coffee to us in the hall, and watch over us in everything. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Amen.