

The Pioneer and Perfector of Faith

Hebrews 12:1-3

John Breon

The writer of Hebrews has recalled many of the Old Testament faithful, the “greats.” Toward the end of that list, he says, “I don’t have time to tell all the stories of those who were faithful to God.” He summarizes by telling in general what true faith looks like. Many faithful people won great victories through deliverance from their enemies. Others won victories through their ability to endure suffering and death for the sake of their faith. But through faith all were victorious in one way or another.

Finally, the writer points out that none of these prior heroes of faith would arrive at the final goal of blessing and fulfillment apart from those who believe in Christ in the present. The family of faith is one. It includes believers who lived under the Old Covenant and those who live under the New Covenant. It includes those who have gone ahead through death and those who still live on earth.

We who believe in Christ now are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses that includes those OT greats and all who have gone before us. They’re witnesses, but not because they’re watching us. They aren’t watching us; they’re still looking to Jesus. They’re witnesses because they testify, they bear witness, that faith is worth it. Remaining faithful to God is worth whatever it takes, whatever it costs.

Then the author adds the name of Jesus to the list of heroes of faith. Jesus crowns this list. Jesus is *the* example of faith and faithfulness. Jesus himself endured great suffering without losing sight of the glory that was to come.

There’s nothing better than Jesus and what we have in him. There’s no going back, only going forward. Jesus is our pattern for going on, for running this race. The first readers of this book and Christians in every age have been called to walk in faith. We’re called to walk in the steps of faith that characterized the saints of the past and the One who is our Lord. Only an attitude like that can sustain us in the adversities we may be called to face.

Chapter 12 begins with a “Therefore.” This means that what follows is connected with what goes before. In light of the faithful heroes of the past and because their example encourages us, we’re to lay aside whatever hinders us, we’re to run the race with perseverance, and we’re to keep looking to Jesus.

Throwing off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. The New Testament often uses athletic images to describe the discipline and dedication we need to live the Christian life. Here, the image is of a race—a long-distance race. The Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint. As we face this long race, we prepare ourselves. We get rid of anything that will slow us down and interfere with our running. The “weight” here is anything that hinders the life of faith portrayed in ch. 11.

Several of you run in various races throughout the year. There’s Colton’s Run, the United Way Fun Run and various other fundraisers. Some run actual marathons. Most people don’t just show up to participate and that’s the first time they’ve been running all year. You prepare, you train. Maybe you’ve carried weights during training, but you don’t carry them when you’re in the race.

In the life of following Jesus, we set aside anything that holds us up or weighs us down. There are activities, hobbies, relationships, possessions that aren’t bad in themselves. But depending on how we view them and how we’re involved with them they can distract from our relationship with Jesus. They can hinder us instead of help us run the race. Of course, sin of any kind will trip us up in the race of following Jesus.

There was a reading in another church’s newsletter once that I’ve kept. It helps us see what’s going on at this point of throwing off weights that hinder and sins that entangle. It’s called “Autobiography in Five Short Chapters.”

I. I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I fall in.

I am lost. ...I am helpless.

It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

II. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in—it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It's my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV. I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V. I walk down a different street.
(Claudia Black, *Repeat After Me*; quoted in Platte Woods Church Newsletter)

As we discover what weighs us down and slows us down and trips us up in our walk with Christ, we lay aside those things. We throw them off by the grace of God.

And we run. *Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* Again, the Christian life is like a long-distance race. One thing this suggests is that the Christian life is forward-moving, not sitting still. We're going

somewhere. We may start and finish with high emotion. But in the middle of the race—where we are now—we need more than emotion. This image of the race calls us to steady, faithful, consistent commitment and love and service.

I ran track in junior high. Once, we were running a 440 relay. I took the hand-off and ran my part of the race. When you're handing off the baton, you yell to the next person to go so they can get up speed and continue the race. You have a certain distance in which to complete the hand-off. I came running up behind Rusty Foster. I yelled, "Go!" and he took off. I kept running. I couldn't catch him. I yelled, "Slow down!" I finally got the baton to him before we got out of the exchange zone.

We've received the baton of faith from previous generations of believers. We're now to run faithfully and persistently so we can hand over faith and all that goes with it.

At ORU, running was a big thing. We were required to take a Health and Physical Education course each semester. We also had to earn "aerobics points." For a certain amount of physical activity, we earned a certain number of points. Also, each year we had a three-mile run to help measure our progress and fitness. When you're not much of a runner, three miles can be a long way. I guess it'd be a 5K run now. Usually we ran it with just our class on a track, which wasn't very exciting.

One year, someone had the idea of having everyone at school do the three-mile run together. They laid out a course around the campus. The time came and off we went. I ran along with some of my friends. I saw lots of people I knew. I saw one guy who was disabled, with his canes, doing his best and completing the course. I don't know if our times improved, but I think everybody had a lot more fun running together.

We don't run the Christian race alone. We go along with friends and family and many others who support and encourage us. One of my favorite illustrations of this comes from a pastor in Colorado. Watching the Special Olympics, he saw a 100-meter race. The starting gun sounded, and the runners took off, some out ahead, some behind. About half-way through the race, a runner in the middle fell down. The ones coming up behind him stopped to see if he was all right. "No!" he said, "I hurt!" The runners up

ahead turned around to see what was going on and then came back to check on him. They dusted him off and kissed his scrapes.

Then they wanted to start the race over. So they all joined hands in the middle of the track and started running again. And that's how they finished the race—all together, holding hands. And nobody lost and everybody won (Bob Tuttle, *Sanctity Without Starch* 157).

We need each other in this race. Because, although this Christian life we're committed to has unequaled rewards, it also makes rigorous demands. We must run with perseverance. That means persistence, endurance, hanging in there, never giving up. To do that we don't look to the encouraging witnesses or the other runners or the final goal or even the reward. Helpful as all those are, they don't sustain us in the race. We look to Christ alone or else we drop out through distraction or we collapse with exhaustion.

We run, *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*. "Fixing our eyes on Jesus" continues the image of the race. The runner must avoid every distraction. We look away from other things, keeping our eyes of faith on Jesus—not just at the beginning of the race, but constantly during the whole struggle. And we know that Christ is always near and in sight.

We're running our race, looking to Jesus—the pioneer and perfecter of faith, the trail blazer, the author and finisher of our faith, the champion, the one who brings faith to full expression. He opened the path of faith for us. We believe in him. We have faith in him. And he was faithful. We look to Jesus as our example of faith. And the example Jesus gives is the way he endured the cross. His attitude toward his cross, his endurance and faithfulness should be the attitude and endurance and faithfulness we have as well.

This is no easy way that Jesus leads us. It's the way of the cross, of humiliation and suffering and sacrifice and death. But beyond all that is joy. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross and the shame. And now he's seated in glory at God's right hand.

The writer of Hebrews calls us to consider Jesus so we won't *grow weary* and *lose heart*. The Greeks used those words to describe an athlete

who flings himself on the ground after he's surged past the winning post of the race. So this says to us, "Don't give up too soon. Don't relax before the finish line. Don't collapse until the winning post is past. Stay on your feet until you get to the end."

Running is a theme in the movie *Forrest Gump*. Forrest runs away from bullies. He runs for touchdowns as a college football player. He runs to save the lives of friends in Viet Nam. At one point Forrest just takes off running across the United States. He runs from one end of the country to the other and back again.

People start following Forrest Gump and running with him. Then, on a highway in the desert, Forrest stops and turns to the two dozen or so people who've been following him. Someone says, "He going to say something." And Forrest Gump says, "I'm kinda tired. I'm gonna go home now." And that's what he does.

People will follow someone who seems to know where he or she is going. We follow the One who knows the way. He knows where he's taking us. Jesus is our leader and he takes us to a goal. He blazes the trail of faith for us. We follow him through the cross and all the way to glory.

Bob Stamps was the chaplain at ORU for several years. At the end of my freshman year he left to go work on a PhD. In the last chapel service he preached, he told a story that he had used each year for freshman orientation. I don't remember hearing it during my orientation, but it made an impression at the end of that year as he was leaving.

Bob was from Jasper, TX, and when he was getting ready to go to college, he felt led by God to attend Wheaton, near Chicago. Wheaton is a long way from Jasper. His friends and family wondered why he would go off like that. But there was one woman in his church who encouraged him. Who are the people in your life who always pray for you and support you and encourage you? Mrs. Nelson was that person for Bob. He says she always wore a black dress, black stockings, black shoes and a little black hat with a flower sticking up. She carried a big black purse. She would tell Bob, "Go on up there and get your education. Get something from God and bring it back to these old dead Methodists!"

When the day came for Bob to leave, he was taking the train (this was in the 1950s). Mrs. Nelson couldn't see him off at the train station, but she would be visiting her son in another town and she'd see him at that station. He said goodbye to his family, shed some tears and got on the train. He was still searching the Bible and praying, wondering if he was really doing God's will.

As the train approached the town where Mrs. Nelson was, he said he never wanted to see anyone like he wanted to see her. It was raining and the window was fogging up. The train didn't even stop there, it just slowed down to get the mail. Bob wiped the window and saw her on the platform. She saw him and came running in the rain. He went to the coupler between cars and looked out. Here she came, running in the rain—black dress, black purse, little flower on her hat drooped down. He leaned out and she reached up and their fingers just touched. Then as the train pulled away, he looked back. And the last time he saw her, she was waving that big black purse and shouting, "Go on, boy! Go on, boy! Go on, boy!"

All the heroes of faith we've read about in Hebrews 11, all the faithful Jesus followers across the centuries, all the faithful people we've known are cheering us on. Their eyes are on Jesus and they tell us to keep our eyes on Jesus. Jesus himself encourages us to endure. They're all saying to us, "Go on!"

Let's go on. Take a step of faith. Begin to look to Jesus and put your faith in him. Take the next step of faith and obedience God is leading you to. Let's go on!