

Look to the Prize
Hebrews 12:1-2

Philippians 2:1-18

Colossians 3: 1-15

Responsive Psalm 139:1-10

So as you know for over a month now we have been working our way through chapter 11, going piece by piece and taking a pretty detailed look at this list of the faithful that the Author here put forth as examples of those in whom God is well pleased, not because of their works, not because of what they did, but because of their faith and belief in him.

As I mentioned last week, good works, and good fruit are manifestations of true faith, in a way you can qualify that believer as being justified by their works, if properly understood that those works flowed out of faith and were not done to gain merit or even earn that justification. Righteous works in a believer is the natural out flowing of faith for it is God working in them to will and to do those works.

Our works, and faith are much like the sun and the moon, one follows and proceeds the other, It is the natural cause and effect, but to take this analogy even further, just as the moon has no light of its own, but rather reflects the light of the sun, so to it is with our faith and our works, our works like the moon are just a reflection of the light given off by our faith. Which is why James put such emphasis on works, for you can't have faith, and not have works, for are we not judged by our fruits?

So what we have been reading about in the last chapter was the events, and the works of faith in these who were listed here...these that the Author refers to as a great cloud of witnesses. A large group of people who for generations, since the world began have testified to the faithfulness, holiness, and majesty of God. So today as we get into our passage, the author is following up on this very point, encouraging his readers that they are not alone, and never have been for they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses of these who have come before them which testify to this faith. SO turn with me this morning to Hebrews chapter 12,...but since verse 1 here starts with therefore, lets go back for context and ready our text from last week, starting in chapter 11, verse 30..and read to verse NOT SURE YET!

So again we see here, just like we did in all of the previous chapters the Author here likens himself to these people that he is writing to, he says, "therefor we" So again, he is writing to a group of believers, a group who can be numbered among the faithful right along with all of these others who have come before, and we to who are in Christ, reading this today are counted I this as well...adding and becoming an even greater cloud of witnesses.

The lesson that he brings forth in this text this morning and the detail he draws out from chapter 11 is the simple fact that in each of these examples they remained faithful in every testing circumstance they faced, both in life, and in death, and in doing so prevailed, and conquered each circumstance...yes even in death, the Christian prevails for Christ conquered death already so that we, through him may likewise be triumphant over it.

He implores us, to lay aside our sin, to lay aside our cares and concerns because at the end of the day all that really matters is our faith and belief in him. Everything is sorta coming full circle here, as we talked about God's providence, his control, and his nature a few weeks back....how that if even an molecule is not where God intended not only would everything fall apart, he honestly wouldn't be God. There can be no rogue, or radical unknown things before God, for if there are then he is not sovereign, and if he is not sovereign, then you are still lost in your sins, for he would not have the power to overcome sin, for there maybe some hidden he wouldn't be aware of, but no.. God is all poweful, all knowing..all merciful, and all sufficient.

He is the one not only willing, but able to save, if he does not have the power to change hearts, to change minds, then again he is not God. We see this throughout all of scripture, for scripture is nothing more than God's record of him accomplishing his redeeming plan. Sovereignty, and powerfully working out every minute detail, fulfilling every single promise, every single prophesy, in his Son, so that those whom he knew, and chose before he even formed the world could come to him.

I hope you see this picture I am trying to paint of this glorious, omniscient all powerful God, for having a greater view of the pure awesome power of our savior helps in our view of faith. This very same God who set the stars, by which as far as we can tell are infinite...is the very same God who knows you...personally, and truly. He is a God who not only numbered the sands in the sea, he also knows your wants, your desires, your needs, your struggles, your sin, your failures.

This God is larger than we are even capable of understanding, Turn with me to 2nd Thessalonians 2 verse 1. “ Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means, for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of his mouth, and destroy with the brightness of his coming.

The power of Satan, that seems to be having a pretty open reign on earth, Satan who is like a lion going to and fro devouring people, tempting, and drawing into sin and rebellion against God.. will be snuffed out with as little effort as blowing out a candle. There are 2 powers in this world, God and Satan, and God is so powerful that even Satan is subject to him.. we see that in the account of Job, were Satan could not do anything to Job without God first allowing it.. and then God set forth limits on what he could do.

Think of the implication of this on our faith, think on how if we fully grasp this, if we can get this bigger, and better picture of who God is how it should impact our faith. What is anything with this God on our side? And we have this great cloud of witnesses, generations upon generations, thousands upon thousands who have gone before who have endured, persevered, and who attest to this God.

The author here says, because of this, because we have THIS God, “let us lay aside every weight, every sin which so easily ensnares us.” Look, we are not slaves to our sins, we are not slaves to our desires, our lusts, we have the power of God abiding in us to overcome, to overthrow such sin. We are not helpless, nor hopeless, will not the God who created you, who loved you, who chose you, not also help you? And this is true not only when it comes to our battle with sin, but also our battle with depression, with stress, with trials, with all temptations... all of these things are included in what this author is saying here, lay aside every weight, lay aside everything that draws you away from God, be faithful, as these who went before us were faithful and run with endurance this race, this life that is set before us.

Throughout the new testament, primarily in Paul's writing we see the use of this analogy of running a race, that our Christian walk in this life, is like a race for which we strive to compete to win the prize at the end. But there is more to it than that, for athletes not only run, but they also train and prepare themselves for the race. In much the same way it is for us with prayer, and spending time in scripture we are training our hearts and minds to endure, to run in faith through whatever this life may throw at us. And just like with an athlete, the better the training, the easier it is to run, the easier it is to endure through it. The Author's use of this analogy is no different here, in fact he starts out by telling us that we are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses, an innumerable group of runners who have gone on before us, who persevered, endured and now are awaiting us to complete our race.

In this running of the race, and persevering is largely one of the major issues that this Author was writing to these Hebrews about. As we saw in the first chapter, they set out to run this race, they were on the right path and had a good start but now have started to slack off, are losing their desire and will to persevere and their effort is beginning to decrease, sin has moved in and is holding them back. They are in danger of quitting, having their guard lowered and being deceived to believe false doctrines. This letter then, is written to encourage, and to stoke them back into the race, to set them back on track, and after listing a large list of those who have gone before in faith, as being witnesses to them now running should serve to remind them that they are engaging in this race and should do so with serious intention, for if they fail to run, if they fail to persevere they are not numbered among these who ran before, but instead among those who are lost.

As Chrysostom wrote, "Many of you have been spectators at the Olympic games, and not only spectators but also enthusiastic partisans and admirers of the competitors. You know then that both during the days of the contest and also all night long the herald thinks of nothing else and has no other care than that the contestant should not disgrace himself when he goes forth. If therefore he who is about to engage in a contest before men uses such great forethought, much more will it befit us to be continually thoughtful and earnest, since our whole life is a contest. Let every night then be a night of devotion, and let us be careful that when we go out in the day we do not make ourselves ridiculous. And would that it were only making ourselves ridiculous, but the judge of the contest is seated at the right hand of the Father, diligently hearkening lest we utter any false note, anything out of tune. For he is not the judge of actions only, but of words also. Let us watch through the night beloved. Therefore I exhort you, let us lay aside all things and look to One only, as we strive to obtain the prize and gain the crown. Let us do all that will enable us to attain to the promised blessings. May we all attain them in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom with the Father and the holy spirit be glory, might and honor now and for ever without end."

Verse 2, says that as we are running this race, we are to be looking to Jesus, the pioneer and finisher of our faith. Just as an athlete who runs, with their eye on the prize, so to we as Christians are to live this life with our eyes upon Christ. Just like an athlete who with singular purpose is running to win, we as Christians should have our gaze set solely upon Christ who is our prize, and great treasure. So great is this treasure, that the Apostle Paul testified that he suffered the loss of all things that this world counted dear, and he counted it as refuse, and garbage in comparison to all there is to gain in Christ.

We saw the same in the last chapter with the account of Moses, which said, "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the Son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin.

Moses considered the agony's of running this race greater than the treasures and wealth of Egypt, because he looked away from the current sufferings and instead fixed his eye on him who is the reward, and in doing so, he endured, as it says, seeing him who is invisible. In this life, which really is a contest of faith, a series of trials and temptations what better way to endure than to look to the one who went before, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of this faith. Apart from Christ, in whom is all the fulfillment of the promises, there is no faith, there is no hope. As we have seen as we went through chapter 11, in every age, the ones which have come before, the ones present, and the ones which come after it is on him that we must look, it is in him and in him only that our faith rests.

Since our faith is a gift, and not something that we are inherently born with, there must be a new birth, a new beginning and new life in this faith that is given. It is Christ alone who is the prize, who gives, and stimulates faith in us and it is because he is the pioneer of our salvation, it is because he is the author of our faith. Therefore our faith is initiated, and sustained by him because he has prayed, and stands on our behalf before the father. And it is for this reason that we look to him, solely as our high priest and because all of the promises are in him, we have assurance that he who has begun this good work in us will complete it.

We also can have assurance knowing that Christ has gone before us, and that he himself has suffered, and was tempted in all ways, taking on flesh, so that he may be numbered among us, yet himself being triumphant over every sin and temptation that befalls us so that he may be the perfect sacrifice and perfect high priest. He being the author, and finisher of our faith, has not asked us to endure anymore than he himself has endured. And he endured the shame, and the cross for the joy that was set before him, knowing that it was all to accomplish our redemption, and to reconcile his people to himself. Christ's entire earthly life is the very embodiment of this trust in God, it is marked from the beginning by total dependence on the father and a complete focus on fulfilling his will. And because of all of this, as the Author wrote back in chapter 4, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Christ was made perfect through such suffering, he was victorious over all temptations afflictions, and even death itself, and in such, as become the very source of eternal salvation of all who obey and trust him. So, in looking to Jesus, in keeping our eye upon him we are looking upon the one who perfected our faith, and who made our faith possible. It is he, and he alone who stands out among this great crowd of witness not only our chief example, but also as the one who has supplied our faith. The Hebrews were being tempted to look to the angels, and other heavenly beings, the Galatians were being tempted to look to the law for their guidance and sanctification, and all of this is no different than what we see even today, for if anyone draws your gaze away from Christ, the one and only true prize then they are a false teacher, a distraction, a stumbling block, and a tool of Satan himself.

Do not look to any other than the one who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, and despised the shame, accomplished that which he set out to do, and has sat down at the right hand of God. It is only in this savior that we can have the power of our sins, and hope in this life. Even in such a great cloud of witnesses as all of those who have gone before, do not look to Abraham, do not look to Moses, but to Christ, for it is he who was the author and finisher of their faith, he is the pre-eminence, he alone is worthy, he alone is the lamb who was slain for you, in all things, look to him, keep your eyes upon him and he who is merciful and mighty will grant you the strength to endure.