

Fix your eyes on Jesus
Kingham & Churchill 21/6/2009
Readings: John 15:1-17; Hebrews 11:39 to 12:13

Introduction

Last week we heard about many heroes of faith in the Old Testament, ending with the last two verses of chapter 11:

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

That “something better for us” that makes every Christian believe perfect in God's eyes, is the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

They taught us faith means trusting in the promises of God.

And I left us with a final question: What will keep your faith strong and growing to the end of your life?

If you've read ahead into chapter 12 you'll know the answer.

Firstly, it's keeping fit for the race, in vv1-3.

And then not getting tripped up by hard times, in vv 4-13.

How do I keep fit for the race? v1-4

Picture with me a Roman amphitheatre with its vast arena surrounded by tier upon tier of seating - thousands there to watch their favourite athletes compete.

Urging them on, 'keep going to the finishing line'.

Well, that's the picture that our author paints here.

v1: “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.”

For you; for me; our race.

His long list of witnesses in chapter 11 have testified that faith in God is worth it, no matter what it cost them.

But now they've all finished their races, and it's our turn.

He's picturing the Christian life as an endurance event, not a sprint; it's not for those who can't persevere.

Following Jesus has never been for the fainthearted.

But though they can inspire us, just by sitting there in the crowd as it were, they can't help us to keep running.

For that we need to look elsewhere.

And it's there in v2: “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.”

If you're finding it hard to trust God in the midst of what you're facing, looking at other people's lives just won't hack it, he says.

And nor will looking at your own feet, getting self-absorbed.

No, take your eyes off your problems; and fix them on Jesus.

My first motorbike had a bent stand so when I lent into a left hander, it would dig into the tarmac.

Thirty years on, I'm still more nervous of left handed bends!

But I've been taught the best way to corner on a motorbike.

Don't look at the road in front of you or you'll panic and brake!

No, focus ahead on where you're going.

You know those slow-motion replays of an athletics race?

Every part of the runner's body is moving in perfect time.

Except the head, which doesn't move, and the eyes which are fixed straight ahead on the finishing line.

Well, if you want to make it to the finishing line and be welcomed with those words ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’, you need to ‘fix your eyes on Jesus’, the author and perfecter of our faith”, he says.

And keep them fixed there.

He is your one hope for the future; don't lose sight of him!

But what does it mean to fix your eyes on Jesus?

Well it means focussing on what he's like; what he's done; what he wants of you, and building a relationship with him.

Running requires putting in the training hours every day.

Ask any of the marathon runners in our church.

Well, the same is true about running the Christian life.

You need to read your Bible and meditate on it daily.

Asking God in prayer to help you understand it better and then to put it into practice in your day, to please and glorify him.

And then, as you face opposition and difficulties, v3: “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The words used for ‘grow weary and lose heart’ were famously used of a runner who collapsed over the line.

That's fine once you've got passed the finish, he is saying.

But you haven't got there yet.

So keep fixing your eyes on Jesus and keep on running.

But v1 also says there are two things to throw off.

“throw off everything that hinders... and... the sin that so easily entangles...”

“Everything that hinders” translates the word for a weight.

So it means things that will hinder your Christian progress.

Roman athletes not only carried no excess fat, they normally ran naked, or nearly so.

There's nothing wrong with thick, warm clothes and a back pack in the right situation.

But in a marathon they will hinder you, slow you down, and exhaust you before you reach the finishing line.

So ask yourself what's hindering you from growing as a Christian.

Let me help you by making that very specific indeed.

What might hinder you from being in church every Sunday?

What stops you being part of a home group each week?

What will get in the way of you spending 15 minutes alone with God in prayer & Bible reading each and every morning?

Does that sound to you like getting a bit fanatical?

I reckon it will come to 6 hours per week at the very most.

That is half of one per cent of your waking week.

How much time do you spend reading the paper, watching TV, listening to music, surfing the net?

Or if you don't tithe your income, what do you spend it on?

That's so important to you it stops you obeying God?

Food, clothes, home, family?

He also says 'throw off the sin that so easily entangles us'.

You don't want me to give you specific examples, do you?

You won't need me to if you're regularly reading your Bible.

You'll keep coming across lists of actions, motives and thoughts that are totally unacceptable to God.

If your eyes are fixed on Jesus and your conscience is pricking, deal with it; promise

God that you'll turn away from it and ask his forgiveness.

And ask him to help you keep to that promise!

If we are going to keep going as Christians, we've got to take the training seriously.

We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" us.

How do I not get tripped up by hard times? v4-13

Now you probably weren't too surprised at that stuff, but you might be by this!

It accounts for so many Christians going off the boil and even giving up following Christ altogether.

And it is how we handle suffering and hardships.

There's the person whose loved one died.

'Where's God in this? He doesn't care for me! Perhaps he doesn't exist? I'm giving up this whole Christian thing.'

Then there's the person whose business fails.

'Where's God in this? He doesn't care for me! Perhaps he doesn't exist? I'm giving up this whole Christian thing.'

And so it goes on and on.

A marriage goes through tough times, even breaks up.

A child rebels or gets into trouble.

My pension pot gets raided and what will I live on?

My best friend turns against me and lies behind my back.

These Hebrews Christians were being persecuted for their faith, but he says in v4 "you haven't yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

No, but just round the corner was emperor Nero.

Then they would start to know what real suffering meant.

So he is worried that they don't know how to handle the relatively minor hardships that come their way.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

v5: "You've forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, don't make light of the Lord's discipline, and don't lose heart when he rebukes you'."

And in every generation countless Christians also forget.

v7: "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son isn't disciplined by his father?"

And he goes on to say that if you aren't being disciplined by God through all sorts of hardships, then perhaps you aren't really one of his children after all.

Be encouraged when you suffer, he's saying!

Now look at v10: "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good..."

And what is that 'good'?

He continues: "that we may share in his holiness."

Isn't that exactly what Paul wrote in Romans chapter 8v28?

"in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Again, what does "for the good" mean?

He continues: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son..."

Do you see?

God's idea of 'good' is not necessarily comfort, wealth and health; it is to make us more like his son.

And speaking for myself, that's very hard work for God!

That's why God has needed to shout at me through hardships.

Now we don't need to be told it's not much fun at the time!

However, it seems we do need to be told exactly that, v11:

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

You ask: 'Are you really saying that God causes me to suffer in order to make me a more godly person?'

Yes, he says it throughout the Bible!

Sometimes he disciplines as a punishment, but often it's to make me more godly and more fruitful in his service.

The word 'discipline' here means to raise a child to maturity.

Jesus called it pruning in our gospel reading about the vine.

He didn't mean becoming a Christian by God pruning you: he said "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

No, he was telling them how to remain in him.

See, it's the same thing – keeping going as a Christian.

So he tells us "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

And so our task, as followers of Jesus, is to "bear much fruit" for God, which is how you'll bring him much glory.

It's about showing the world the difference he can make in the life of an ordinary sinner like me and like you!

But Jesus went on: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

Jesus knew a thing or two about pruning!

My Nan used to say 'You can't prune a rose too hard.'

It's taken me years to really trust Nan, but she was right.

In Mallorca we have a favourite old town square full of trees.

Last year the council massacred them and all that was left were telegraph poles with lumps on!

This year the trees were fuller and more beautiful than ever.

Most of us think that when God prunes us, he cuts off the sinful stuff that so easily entangles us, and then the excess weight that hinders us.

But let me quote from the excellent Rick Warren in closing:

God "does do that, but he also cuts off stuff that is alive and successful. A business that is going great, a satisfying relationship, good health. Some of that may get pruned off for greater fruitfulness. It is not just deadwood that goes. God often cuts back good things too, in order to make us healthier. It's not always pleasant, but pruning is absolutely essential for spiritual growth. It's not optional. Remember, God is glorified when we bear 'much fruit', and that requires pruning. [But] we must remember that the loppers are in the hands of our loving God. He knows what he is doing, and he wants what is best for us."

Conclusion

Let me wrap it up like this.

For you and me to 'bear much fruit' in our lives, in the sense that Jesus meant it, we need to become more and more like him in the way we live our lives.

That means a joint project between the Holy Spirit and me, working together, seamlessly for the same goal: greater Christlikeness.

And what does that mean?

Christ lived a life of perfect moral purity and absolute submission to, and trust in, his Heavenly Father's will.

So for you to grow more like Christ you need to do those two things, Hebrews 12 says.

You need to grow in moral purity – that's 'holiness' in v10 and 'a harvest of righteousness and peace' in v11.

That will involve getting rid of all 'sin that so easily entangles' as well as the things that 'hinder' your progress.

And you need to submit to and trust your Heavenly Father's perfect will in your life.

And that will often mean trusting him, and even praising him, when he uses hardships to discipline and prune you.

Never forget that he is your loving Heavenly Father and he only works for your good.

Are you willing to do that?

Let us pray.

Prayer (do business)