

Fellowship Bible Church
Sermon Series: God's Hall of Fame
"Faith Is Endurance"
11-27-2011
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TEXT: HEBREWS 11:36-12:3

There is a passage of Scripture that I would like for all of us to read out loud together. You see it on the screen. Let's read it together.

"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,
according to His power that is at work within us,
to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations forever and forever. Amen."

Aren't you grateful to God for the men and women who have laid down their lives and believed God when there was nothing here but just a vision, just a vision? I am going to do something that he is going to make me pay for later on, but as I was watching that video I could not help but think about Bob Roland, who is one of our founding pastors. He was here when there was nothing here and trusted God for this. Not only that but some of you who are new here don't realize that Fellowship Christian Schools came out of that whole vision. They didn't have resources. They didn't have anything but faith in God and that God was supposed to do this. Bob, I want you to stand and I want us to recognize you -- Bob Roland back over here -- please Bob and Jeannie [applause]. He does not like that. He is going to make me pay for it, but that is okay. He is a family counselor so he can't be so abusive to me [laughter].

It is really a joy and a treat to be here at this church and to be just associated with what God is doing here. I want to encourage us, and this fits within the message that I am going to be sharing today. Don't forget where you came from. Don't forget where you came from. Some of us have a hard time enduring because we have cut off our past and all we think exists is our present moment in history. When that happens to you, you forget about the models of those who struggled and believed and made it and fear sets in. We get gripped with the current crises and we get overwhelmed with what is going on right now. I want to encourage every last one of us to not forget where you came from and to not forget the people who paid the tuition in terms of their lives for you to stand on their shoulders. There is honey in that carcass. Eat it and be enriched by it and praise God for it. Again, I don't want to embarrass him, but I have to tell you this. Bob Roland is a great man, a great, great man. I often will walk past him and just shake my head in thanksgiving to God that he has endured and he has done whatever is necessary to make sure that this church thrives and is blessed. We have elders here and we have leaders here who are deeply rooted in that heritage, not that we glorify the past, but we hold on to sacred stewardship because we know that it is going to guide us into the future.

Father, thank You so very much for who You are and thank You, oh God, for the men and women who believed You, who trusted You, who sometimes didn't get paychecks and who knew that God was going to work and He was going to use this church to make an impact in this city and around the world. Thank You for their faith, Father. Thank You for the stewardship responsibility that we have, and God may we be found faithful LORD. We don't ask You for greatness in our lives and we don't ask You, oh God, for recognition but help us. Give us the strength to do everything that You call us to do and bring glory to God for this moment in history. Now Father bless our hearts today, and, LORD, as we talk about enduring faith and that faith is endurance I know that we all struggle. I know that we have challenges. I know that we have mountains to climb and we have

issues hanging around us. I know that even over Thanksgiving some of those feelings and problems and issues were triggered in our minds. So, LORD I pray that You will give us hope and help. Give us motivation. Give us Your heart. Give us what we need. And for that person who is laboring under the burden of sin today, who has not said yes to Jesus, I pray LORD God may be they be engulfed by the love of the LORD Jesus. Thank You for Your goodness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

If you have a Bible I want you to meet me in Hebrews chapter 11. This is the last message in this five-part series on faith. I have to tell you this. God speaks to my heart when I study the Word. You need to know when I study the Scriptures often I fall on my knees as I am preparing messages. I have a deep abiding conviction that in order for me to be authentic as a preacher I have to personally apply what God gives me to you or else I am just making speeches or addresses and you can become very hypocritical. God has spoken to my heart as I have gone through this whole series on faith. I have read Hebrews 11 many, many times, but the LORD has reminded me of the need to live constantly by faith and to never kick it into neutral, don't coast, but to keep pressing forward.

I want to give a bit of a context and then I am going to read a pretty lengthy passage, Hebrews 11:32-12:3. Just to set this up again and to remind us where we have been, the very first message was an orientation. Basically it is what the writer of Hebrews does himself in Hebrews chapter 11:1-3 and then in verse 6 where he orients us concerning the nature of faith. Basically what he is saying is that there is no such thing as Christianity without faith – zero. There is no Christianity without faith. The very nature of Christianity is driven by faith, to believe God, to bridge the gaps in our lives, to do what He has called us to be about. In fact, he says emphatically “without faith it is impossible to please God,” categorically impossible to please God. So, faith is what God wants us to exercise in order for us to please Him.

Then I suggested to you as you organize Hebrews chapter 11 and you go through these biographical snapshots that they fall into four statements. I believe there are four descriptive statements that the writer uses these biographical snapshots to illustrate. The very first statement is that faith is obedience. Faith is obedience. You cannot say that you are believing God and disobey Him at the same time; and he uses Abraham primarily through that segment.

The second statement is that faith is movement. Faith is movement. You cannot exercise faith and stay where you are, that faith means to follow. You have got to go somewhere. You have got to move. Faith is a verb, as I have been saying every week even when it is a noun. Faith presupposes movement.

Then last week I talked about faith is mission. Now there is a difference between movement and mission. Mission speaks more to the purpose and vision, something to be gained and something to be accomplished, a purpose that God has placed on your heart. I connected that, and I really believe that this is the connection in the book of Hebrews to Ephesians 2:10, that we are “His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them,” and that each one of us, every last one of us we have mission. We have purpose. There is something that God has written in our souls. I want to challenge you, and I will continue to challenge all of us as your pastor, because I really believe that this is where freedom is found in the Christian life. Please do not live your Christianity based upon assumption. Please don't do that. Please don't assume things but press into what is it that God wants to accomplish through your moment in history, through this life that He has given to you; and faith drives that. Faith reveals that. Faith makes that purpose in mission flourish.

The bottom line today is I want to give a statement which I really believe is the climax; that is, faith is endurance. I have to tell you this last section collides with so much of our popular thinking about faith and

what we have taught and preached about faith than any other text in the Bible. In fact, if you listen to messages on Hebrews 11 very seldom will you hear people talking about this last section of Hebrews 11. The reason for that is that there is a different category of people, and I am going to get to that in a second, but I want to pick this up in verse 32. I want you to notice the abrupt change in audience as we get down to verse 36, so beginning at Hebrews 11: 32:

“And what more shall I say?
For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah,
of David and Samuel and the prophets
—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises,
stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword,
were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.
Women received back their dead by resurrection.
[now the change]
Some were tortured,
refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.
[then verse 36]
Others [some] suffered mocking and flogging,
and even chains and imprisonment.
They were stoned, they were sawn in two,
they were killed with the sword.
They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated
—of whom the world was not worthy
—wandering about in deserts and mountains,
and in dens and caves of the earth.
And all these,
though commended through their faith,
did not receive what was promised,
since God had provided something better for us,
that apart from us they should not be made perfect.
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,
despising the shame,
and is 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 fainthearted.”

This is not a very popular message that I am going to share with you today because this is not a very popular passage of Scripture. There is not a lot of transactional victory that is read in this text. There is not a lot of stuff that these people experienced in their lifetime, but these are noble remnants, the noble people, who modeled to us that faith if anything is endurance. It is pressing through. It is going through.

Bruce Lee, the movie star and martial artist, had this quip to say. He said, “A fight is not won by a one-

puncher kick. Either learn to endure or higher a bodyguard.” I think he captures the essence of the Christian life basically. Endurance is not optional. You will endure or you better have some other options because there are seasons in our lives when God will step back from us. He is not really stepping back from us as He is right there, but the sense of His presence is withdrawn. The sense of affirmation is withdrawn and the sense of “victory” is taken off the table. What He wants us to do is just stand up with our armor on, press into the battle, as we feel the arrows flying by our heads, but keep pressing forward, keep enduring. There is no finish line in sight. There is no payoff in sight. There is no quid pro quo for the things I have done in the past. All you see are arrows and heat and mess and stuff. He says, “Crawford, press in. Press in.”

Jesus said in Matthew 24:13 endurance is a part of the whole Christian life; and we don't talk so much about this, but endurance He says really is evidence that you are saved. In fact He says, “Those who endure to the end will be saved,” or delivered. The question that this text of Scripture begs all of us to answer, which is the elephant in the room, is this. So, I want to put it right up front. What if God told you that you were going to go through excruciating persecution and suffering for what you are believing Him for? Then He added, “but you would never get to experience its fulfillment.” I mean that is the question this text begs. That is the question this text begs. Now we are all uncomfortable with that, including myself. What if God told you to lay down your life for this vision and dream that He has placed on your heart and He said, “You are going to go through some hellacious suffering and pressure. What’s more, you are not going to experience the fulfillment of what you are believing Me for.”

The big question is would you keep believing? Would you keep believing? Listen to me ladies and gentlemen; faith is not a lucky rabbit’s foot. Faith is not cheap in the Bible. Faith is not a means of just getting what you want from God. Now I need to balance that by saying there are seasons in which He wants us to exercise faith to get what we need from Him, but it is not the faith that we worship. It is the God that we worship. Faith is a means for doing greater things in our hearts and lives. So, this question that runs around all of us, and I say this advisedly and I mean this as I am not being profane, but suppose you die having gone through a version of hell in this life and you never get what you are believing God for?

You see the point of Hebrews 11:36-12:3, the point the writer is encouraging us, before it is all over we are all going to go through some things that will test our endurance. I would add there will be some dreams when they lower you and me in the ground that will be left unmet and unfilled. Not everybody will stick around to finish. I have to tell you this. The ranks of Christianity have been thinned by people who have been disappointed with God, folks who did not receive what they were believing God for and they thought God had let them down. Part of the problem is how we teach people. As preachers and teachers we teach people that God is into quid pro quo. If you believe hard enough, if you pray hard enough, and you do all the right things, that somehow we can get God sucked into behavioral modification, that He will come along and He will do what we demand Him to do, that He becomes our bellman or He becomes our servant. So, when God does not come through we get terribly disappointed. We get frustrated. We get let down, and yet this text tells us there is nobility involved in faith. There is another dimension involved in faith that goes past where we are.

So, I want to walk through sort of a brief biographical sketch of those men and women of God who exhibit enduring faith right here from the text. In fact, let me give it to you upfront. There are four points of my message. I actually think the fourth point is the application, and I am not going to go outside the text to draw the application because I think brilliantly the writer of Hebrews when you get to chapter 12:1-3 draws the application of everything that he said in Hebrews chapter 11. It is so clear, so I don't want to mess that up. Listen to what he says. People who possess enduring faith are marked by these three things. (1) They are in a special category. (2) Secondly, they are the target of special recognition from God, and (3) there is a special mission that God has given to them.

1. A SPECIAL CATEGORY (11:36-38)

A. Persecution Couldn't Stop Them

First of all they are in a special category. Where do you get that from? Again, I want you to go back to verse 35. The middle of verse 35 is where the writer begins to change. In fact it is an abrupt change. Up until this point, yeah, he has talked about people who have suffered some, but he has also talked about a lot of folks who have gotten the payoff during their lifetime. Right? They received what was promised during their lifetime; some of them did. They received people back from the dead, as he described here. Then he says in verse 35 “some were tortured refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.” Then there is this word “others,” a special category. It is a swift transition of thought. The writer moves from faith’s triumphs to what seemed to be its defeat. Right? I mean as you read this text you think for a moment superficially they are “losers.” I mean just the initial response is “how come they were hiding in caves and how come they were persecuted and how come they didn’t get what they were believing God for? Shouldn’t they be able to name it and claim it? By the way, since 2008 many of those dudes have backed off that message, haven’t they, with the economy tanking? Yeah. What about these folks? Well, the inference here in verse 32 is that these followers of Christ are put in God’s hall of fame, these folks who have undergone persecution, these people who have undergone unimaginable pressure and problems and hassles and pain and did not receive what they were believing God for in their lifetime. God says they are in my hall of faith. They are there right next to Abraham and right next to Moses. They are right there. Their names are not listed for us, but they are there. In fact verses 36-38 cite about a dozen kinds of persecution that people of faith endured. It is almost as if, and I don't think he is giving an exhaustive list here, it is almost as if he is saying, anything that you can imagine bad, awful, painful, excruciating, things that you would not want to experience, have happened to these people.

B. Destitution Couldn't Stop Them

Please do not tell folks, please do not tell nonbelievers, that bad things do not happen to Christians. Look, they died. They were martyrs, but the point of these verses, the two big things, that you need to understand, the point of this text here in verse 36, is that persecution couldn’t stop them and destitution couldn’t stop them. No matter what God allowed to happen to them, no matter what God allowed to be taken away from them, their faith was not lodged in the transactional. Their faith was not lodged in this world. Their faith was not lodged in God being somehow a big benefactor in the sky who always rescues me from hard times. Their faith was richer than that. They were driven by a nobility. They were driven by a vision. They were driven by a rightness about trusting God that this world knows nothing about.

A couple of observations, in verse 36 once again he says “others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.” I think what he is saying here, and obviously I said it already, that not all men and women of faith experience miraculous deliverance. Secondly, akin to that, many unknown men and women of faith were not delivered from difficult circumstances yet God honored their faith. Today I think of the quiet faithful Christians who are suffering persecution and who have been martyred in Iran, Afghanistan, and Indonesia this past week. Their names will never appear in anybody’s biography. You won’t read an article about them; but I tell you what, they are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

May I say this to you? There is a form or brand of hero worship that we get sucked into, even in our evangelical culture. Don't just gravitate toward the prominent and popular people as your heroes. Don't do that. Don't make the assumption because somebody has great visibility that somehow they are the hero of the faith. I hear Christians, and in fact I read books where people say, “Well, the apostle Paul was the greatest

Christian who ever lived.” I don't know that I could say that. We say that because he wrote -- what -- twelve or thirteen books of the New Testament and this kind of thing. We say things like “when we get to heaven Billy Graham is going to be right next to Jesus.” I love Billy Graham and I love Bill Bright; they are going to be right next to Jesus. I don't know that I know that. I don't know that you know that. I think we are going to be surprised at the “no names,” the people who didn't have prominence that God is going to show off in heaven because they believed Him.

2. GOD'S SPECIAL RECOGNITION (11:38a, 39a)

A. Not From This World

Number two, those who have enduring faith draw God's special recognition. I think the writer of Hebrews thought that perhaps his readers might think that after he gave this litany of people who had experienced deliverance and who had experienced what they were believing God for. Yeah, keep believing and maybe God is going to do that. I think he was kind of sensing, “you know, these people might think these folks are losers.” Notice what he says here in verse 38 in the first part.

“They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated”
[he says, “oh, by the way”]
—of whom the world was not worthy”

What is he saying? He is saying these people are not from this world. This world knows nothing about what it takes to endure like this. This world knows nothing about a peace that comes from God that transcends human expectations. They are not from this world. We say the world shut them out, but God wrapped His arms around them and put them on display. I want to tell you right now if you are believing God and you are going through a hard time and you don't sense there is any payoff in sight and all you feel is pressure, problems, hassles, and issues and it just seems like every single day there is more bad news, yet you just keep taking a step and you keep taking another step and you just keep taking another step. I have to tell you this. You may not get a standing ovation down here, but heaven is standing up because you are honoring God in the midst of difficulty. You are honoring Him by faith. You are defying your circumstances. You are defying the feedback and you are just honoring God and you are doing the right thing. Here the writer of Hebrews says “of whom the world was not worthy.”

You see it takes more faith to endure than it does to escape. Anybody can quit. Anybody can change their reality. Anybody can get out of a hard marriage. Anybody can walk away from a kid that is giving them headaches. Anybody can walk off a job. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion there is this epidemic of superficiality in our culture, excuse my directness. There is this epidemic of superficiality and I think what happens is that people when they don't like something they cut and run. They leak. They change their reality. They change the things around them, but what they really need they never get because they don't stick around long enough to endure anything. They don't lead out of character; they lead out of convenience. They begin to reflect their environment rather bringing hope and stability to future generations. Do you follow what I am saying here? Here the writer is highlighting this. He is underscoring this reality. “Don't run.” It takes more faith to stay here and to face my shortcomings and to face my failures and to eat humble pie and to grow in the midst of something than just cut and run.

This kind of reminds me of something; that is humorous. I don't know if you guys saw this. We have some runners in our church. I mean Shane, Richard, Tim, and a bunch of these folks. I don't get this, okay? I have to be honest with you. They come back and say stuff like, “Man, we were in that 26 miles and I was about ready

to die at mile 18.” I said, “Why didn’t you stop?” “I had to keep going man. It was great.” I said, “Really?” [laughter]. They keep trying to get me there. Did you hear about this dude in the New York Marathon? This was hilarious. Homeboy got disqualified. Do you know why he got disqualified? When nobody was looking he caught a ride. He is my kind of man. I love him. He got on a bus. He gets off the bus and [laughter]. This does not have anything to do with the text, but I really wanted to tell that story. It is hilarious.

Faith enables us to turn from the approval of the world and seek only the approval of God. That is what enduring faith does. When God takes all our options off the table and makes you wait on Him and continue to press into Him what that does for us is that it purifies our thinking. It purifies our worldview. You stop kissing up to people. You stop worshipping people. You stop being a people pleaser. You know, what we look to we will sacrifice for. If you are constantly looking to the world, you are going to sacrifice your values for it. Oh, but when we look to God to keep us, we will sacrifice our lives for Him.

B. The Pride Of Heaven

Then there is the pride of heaven. In verse 39a, the first part of the verse, it is as if he says again, “Wait, wait, wait. I am not talking about losers here. Please don’t misunderstand me. These folks who were persecuted and died, who didn’t receive what was promised, who lived in caves and goatskins, and all of that stuff was taken from them, and I am not naming any names here, we don’t know who they are. I am not talking about losers here.” He says “and all these, though commended through their faith.”

I can’t help but think of the first martyr of the church, Stephen. Here he is in Acts chapter 7 being stoned to death. This is not just a story. This is real. He was stoned to death. Picture this. He looks up into heaven, and Jesus is normally seated at the right hand of God the Father, right? Well, when he looks up into heaven Jesus is standing. Now listen to me. Listen to me. Jesus could have stopped them from throwing the stones. He could have killed every last one of them, but there was a greater purpose in mind. It is really interesting because here Stephen sees the approval and the blessing and the glory of God in the midst of his pain. To go through pain does not mean that you wait for the glory of God. To go through pain may mean that you are experiencing the glory of God. To go through a hard time does not mean that God’s presence is not known to you. It could very well mean that God’s presence is being manifested to you.

These folks were commended to God. As I said in the first week this word “commend” is used about five times in this text. God points out “that is My Son. Look at Him. He is believing Me.” Imagine He said that about Job. “That is My son.” Don’t conclude that an absence of deliverance means a lack of faith. I think that is the implication here. Don’t conclude that. Don’t conclude that when somebody is going through a hard time, please don’t be superficial. Christians say some of the most idiotic things to people who are suffering. Let’s not act like God in somebody’s life. Don’t make the assumption that they don’t have enough faith because they are not healed. Don’t make the assumption that they don’t have enough faith because you know their kid is acting out and he or she is in rebellion. Don’t assume that they have done something wrong even. Here what he is saying is, “Look, God is at work and these people are in an awful situation, but they still have faith.”

If God is glorified by delivering His people, He will do it. If He sees fit to be glorified by not delivering His people, then He will do that. You see our ultimate prize is the pleasure and presence of God and not the fulfillment of our desire. Faith must never become an idol to us. Do you remember that I said that a few weeks ago? I want to underscore that. Some people, and please forgive me, but some in the name and claim it prosperity movement have made faith an idol. Faith is a vehicle. God is the One that we worship. You don’t make faith an idol. Look back if you will again to Hebrews 11:13-16. The writer says:

“These all died in faith,
having not received the things promised,
but having seen them and greeted them from afar,
and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.
For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.
If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out
they would have had opportunity to return,
but as it is they desire a better country,
that is a heavenly one.
Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God,
for He has prepared for them a city.”

You see the glory of God here. You see the real passion is God. Yes, I am believing God. Yes, I am trusting God. I am trusting God. I am not trusting faith. I am trusting God.

William Barclay, bible scholar, says that, “endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing but to turn it into glory.” We live in the sight of God. For those of us who are going through a hard time, for those of us who are under a load right now, whether it is financial stress and pressure, whatever it might be, I want to encourage you to make this your prayer everyday. “God, I really want relief. I would love it if You would remove this, but more than anything I want You to be glorified. If Your glory is going to be seen by me carrying this burden each step of the way and experiencing Your hand to encourage me, bless Your name; or if it advances Your glory for You to miraculously take it away, bless Your name. I want to glorify You.” That is the passion of faith, the acknowledgement of God. The only reason why we exercise faith is so that during our moment in history our lives tell the truth about God.

3. A SPECIAL MISSION (11:39-40)

A. "Who Not Just What"

Thirdly, those who have enduring faith have a special mission. I really believe that verses 39 and 40 represent the primary target of enduring faith. It has to do with legacy. It has to do with legacy. Listen to what he says here beginning at verse 39:

“And all these,
though commended through their faith,
did not receive what was promised,
since God had provided something better for us,
that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

Do you remember I said some weeks ago that faith is a continuum? Remember that? Remember that I said our problem is that we think that the purposes of God are only locked in my generation; meaning, as long as I am breathing, right? As long as I am vertical, I am believing God and it should happen in my generation.” No, no, no. God is not constricted by my moment in history. There are things that God will place on my heart to believe Him for that my children will take to the next level or that people who are close to me will take to the next level. There are visions that God gives you that are not for you to accomplish right now. So, we have to view our lives in the grander scheme of things. Trust me. This is not getting us off the hot seat, and I am not trying to neuter faith by making this explanation. I am trying to be true to the text here, that the nobility of our faith is not tied to a clock or calendar, but it is controlled by God, what God wants done, and when He wants it done. So, he says here God says no, no, no, no, no. I am not going to let your generation see this

fulfillment. You are not going to run through the finish line but you are going to start the race. You are going to start the race.

Let me just give you two subpoints and then I want to unpack this with an illustration that I hope does not offend people, but it is one that is weighty and memorable. In verse 39 he really underscores what I said a few moments ago. It is the “who,” not just the “what.” It is the “who,” not just the “what.” It is all about God and it is not just about “what” you are believing for. They did not receive “what” was promised because the “who” was more important than the “what.” Do you see that?

B. “Us” Not Just “Them”

(1) Legacy

The second thing is about “us,” here, not just “them” that we see in verse 40.

“that apart from us they should not be made perfect
[or complete]”

The legacy is theirs. As I look forward I am believing God and hoping future generations will eat the sweetness out of the struggles of my life. That is my legacy. That is my legacy. Now this generation when given that legacy we have a responsibility – “ours.” You see you have to know where you came from. You have to know where you came from. You have to know your spiritual heritage. That is the reason why parents, listen to me, the greatest thing that you can do in raising your children is make sure that they understand the spiritual mile markers in their development. Throughout history God has always had a remnant. This is part of remnant theology, and I could get into this, but God has always had a remnant. The purpose of the remnant was to endure devastation and heartache and pain, often without a payoff, so that when God would re-engage what He wanted to do in the next generation He always had a visible model to point back to -- whether it was a remnant left in Jerusalem after the fall and Nehemiah going back. That little remnant kept the spark alive. So it is in your journey. There are remnant parts of our walk with God. Do you follow what I am trying to say here? I feel like I have marbles in my mouth this morning. There are remnant parts of our walk with God, things that God wants to leverage later on.

Let me give you an illustration. Regrettably racism is a part of our history as a nation. Slavery and all that it meant, all the pain, the demeaning side of it, all of what that meant. It is a part of our history. Many of us have no idea the price that so many people paid; and I say this please, and I started to take this out of my notes even when I got up early this morning because I am not guiltless [sic] anyone, but there is a powerful message behind all of this. There are hotels I couldn't stay in as early as 1965. There were water fountains I couldn't drink out of. There were amusement parks I couldn't take my kids to.

John Piper in his wonderful book, and I think everybody ought to get this book as it is going to challenge you. I have waited my whole life for somebody to write about racism from a decided theological framework, and Piper has given us such a book. It is called “Bloodlines.” Most of us don't know this because Piper stands for social justice and his church is diverse and all of that, but most people don't know that he grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and in his own words as he goes through his amazing book he calls himself an “avowed racist.” In the early 1960s his family had a maid in their household, and his older sister got married. John was an usher in the wedding and his role was

to stand in the foyer of the church and help people come in and this kind of thing. The church had a policy that no African-Americans could even darken the door of the church, period. This is in the early '60s, okay, not so long ago. John's mom had invited the maid, who was like part of the family. She was African-American. So, she shows up at the church and the deacons quickly began to usher her out of the church. John's mom hears about that. The woman gets up and goes out there to get her and brings her in and sat her down. John said that was the "beginning of the unraveling of my own personal racism, to see the courage."

(2) Responsibility

Today my kids hear that stuff and they say, "Courage. That ain't no courage." Well, back in the day that was courageous. I might as well tell the truth. That was courageous in Greenville, South Carolina. It spoke to his heart. You see the diversity in our church where we are going and I don't make this a big deal. In fact, I don't even like preaching on this because I think the people of God ought to be the people of God. We ought to love people period. I don't care where you came from and that we are going to reflect the unity of the body of Christ, but I do understand that many paid a dear price for us to do what we are doing. I think about my own personal life. I was sharing this with my son and a couple of young leaders his own age. They were asking me about the loneliness and my son was saying, "Dad, you came along where you were called an Uncle Tom because you were part of the predominantly white Christian organization in leadership and you felt like you should not be typecast, that you could love people and hang out with them, and I know they called you names and stuff. He says interestingly enough I don't have too much of that problem. I began to explain to him. "You know it was because of your grandfather, my dad." My father told me something growing up as I got a few hits when I was in high school for hanging around with some of my "white friends" this kind of thing. I never thought I had to make the choice. One day one of my black friends was cracking on me about doing that or selling out or whatever the term was and my dad said to me, and I was probably around 14 years old, he said, "Boy, let me tell you something. Don't you ever let anybody tell you who your friends should be." I don't know why that galvanized me and until this very day I don't allow anybody to tell me who I should associate with.

All I am trying to say is that here is my dad who grew up in Jim Crow telling me this, but he knew what was right. So, despite the environment you always do what is right. You see what this text is telling us is that life and faith is a relay race. Yet part of my life I will blast to the finish line, but slaves and other people paid a price for me to be able to do that. Now in my generation I am the one that is starting the race or maybe am in the middle of the race and the handoff is given to the next generation. I won't blast through that finish line, but I have to put into their hands faith. Do you follow what I am saying? I got to put in their hands faith. You have to make the handoff. You can't blow it. You can't quit now. You can't give up right now. You can't throw in the towel right now. Why? Because there are folks behind you that paid too much and there are folks coming after you that are looking to you to help them. So, you can't walk away. You have to give the next generation faith, not doubt or fear, or disobedience.

4. A SACRED, SOLEMN COMMITMENT (12:1-3)

A. Shed The "Stuff"

Here is the application. Those who have enduring faith make a sacred solemn commitment. I happen to believe the argument of Hebrews 11 ends at verse 3 of what we have in chapter 12 as you follow the flow of

this because he gives us the ultimate illustration. Let me just for the sake of time click off the three primary applications that the writer makes. He says, "Oh, okay, I gave you all of these biographical snapshots. I have told you "that without faith it is impossible to please God." I told you that faith is obedience, and faith is movement, and faith is mission, and now faith is endurance. Okay, what should we do? He says do three things: (1) shed the stuff, (2) focus on Jesus, and (3) don't quit. Where do you get that from? Verse 1:

"Therefore since we were 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,"

(1) Distractions

The stuff that he is talking about here is twofold. He uses "weight" and he uses the word "sin." I think "weight" is talking about distractions, not necessarily sin, but stuff that weighs you down. It is kind of like the athlete. You have seen baseball players standing in a circle and put these two weighted rings around the bat. He swings the bat. Well, he is not going to get in the batter's box because he will never be able to hit a 95-mile per hour fastball with those weights on it. He will take the weight off. You have seen basketball players when they are working out and in practice they will put weights around their ankles to help with their jumping ability. Well, they are not going to wear that in a game. So, what he is saying is get rid of those distractions.

I would just like to ask you what are the unnecessary distractions in your life? It could be just hobbies taking too much of your time, you know just taking too much of your time. It could be TV is taking too much of your time. It could be other stuff, not necessarily in the sin category, but you are going to the batter's box with weights on the bat.

(2) Sin

Then he talks about the sin and I am going to give an unpopular view on this, a minority view on this. He says "the sin which clings so closely to us." I think the sin that he is talking about here is the sin of unbelief. I think in context he is talking about the sin of unbelief, the opposite of faith. You are not believing. By the way translated "clings to closely" in Greek is "easily in circles" is literally what it says. It is the sense it can cause a surprise fall that doubt can trip you up at any moment. You have to be vigilant about your faith and what all that means. I suggest that the first of every month maybe you make a list of God's blessing in your life. If you do that it is His way of erasing doubt, especially when you are going through a hard time.

B. Focus on Jesus

(1) His Endurance

Focus on Jesus. It is interesting the choice of words that he uses here:

"looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,
who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,
despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

He says glance at others but gaze at Jesus. He says okay I gave you this cloud of witnesses. I talked about these folks in Hebrews 11. They are great motivators. They exhibited elements of faith. They modeled things for us. Glance at them but gaze at Jesus because Jesus is the perfect One. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith.

(2) His Reward

You look at His endurance as a model to you but also look at His reward. You will be rewarded one day. There is a payoff.

C. DON'T QUIT

Then he says finally don't quit. Verse 3 says:

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself,
so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

I actually believe that this clause, his purpose clause, is a summary statement of Hebrews 11. I really believe that. He says:

“so that you may not grow weary”

Literally the Greek word is “faint in your souls.” Don't give up. Don't give up. Don't quit.

I am going to ask Ryan and the team to come up. As they come I am going to leave you with this quote from Corrie ten Boom. She says, “If God sends us on strong paths we are provided strong shoes.” That is what He will do for us. I would like for us to stand together. As they sing this sweet song “Give Me Jesus,” and while you are standing I would like to ask some of our elders and staff and some of our other leaders in the audience to come up front. I want to invite you to come up at the end of the service if you are struggling with your faith or maybe you are in a situation where you know you need somebody to pray for you as your endurance is being tested. We are all there. We are all there. I would like for you to come and let's just pray for one another. You pray for me and I'll pray for you. If that is where you are right now just say Crawford or Bob or whoever would you just pray.

Father, thank You for Jesus. Thank You that, LORD, even when we do get weary You come alongside and give us what we need to keep taking another step. LORD, may we pick up the baton from those who have labored in obscurity and may we hold it high and be faithful during our moment in history, and that no matter what happens to us, LORD, help us not to drop the baton. May we grab the hands of those who are waiting patiently in the next generation and perhaps say “silver and gold have I none,” but I believe in an unfailing God. He has brought me this far by faith and He will take you to the finish line. Oh, God, may we be found faithful. Encourage our hearts we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.