

“OUR HOPE: JESUS AUTHOR AND PERFECTOR OF FAITH”

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Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the men of old gained approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. ⁴By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. ⁷By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. ⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; “for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; ¹²therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. ¹³All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they

would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But 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 a city for them.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type.

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. ²¹By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

²²By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

²³By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. ²⁴By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; ²⁵choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin;

²⁶considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the first-born might not touch them. ²⁹By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

³²And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵*Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸(men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

^{12:1}*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*

²*Fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

³*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.*

The week prior to my writing the sermon which served as basic research for this chapter, had been most exhilarating and demanding, reminding me again of my inability to be all things to all men. Throughout the week I had tried hard to be father to my children, especially my daughter who was home from college for a few hours. Husband to my wife. Pastor to my flock. A worthy minister of God to the community. A faithful student of God's written and living Word. Yet, it was a week in which I had been unable to “get it all together.”

Preaching has always been excruciatingly difficult for me. Some men seem to have a natural pulpit gift. My effectiveness, if there be any, has come as the product of hard work. And, while I labor diligently over every sermon, rarely have I struggled with a message as much as the one in question.

When I finished writing my message on Friday, I threw up my hands in horror and informed my

secretary I would have to re-do the whole thing. It just wouldn't jell. I struggled with it Friday evening and all day Saturday. Finally, about 11:00 o'clock Saturday evening I was so exhausted I said, "Father, I don't know what's behind all this, but I'll have to leave this unfinished sermon with You, and get some sleep. I'm weary to the bone."

About 11:30, I drifted off to sleep. After sleeping about five, possibly ten, minutes the phone rang. It was a person gravely concerned about a friend in the Los Angeles area who had called long distance to say she was contemplating suicide. This person didn't quite know what to say or do to help her friend. We spent some time on the phone devising a plan whereby some support could be given by long distance, and contacts were made for additional support where the troubled friend lived.

I tried to go back to sleep and had just drifted off when the telephone rang a second time. It was another lady, one whom I did not know, who also had come to such a crisis point in her life she questioned whether life was worth continuing. For the better part of an hour, I ministered to her over the telephone. We prayed together. I hung up the phone and, though I needed sleep badly, I was bug-eyed. So I lay there praying for the people who had been brought to my attention. After a time, my prayer turned to asking God for some insight as to what this was all about.

He said, "Son, what is the primary crisis these people are facing?" "Well, Father," I replied, "it looks to me like a crisis of faith." He answered, "That's right. And many of My children are going through similar crises. I've let you struggle with the demands of this week, an unfinished sermon and these midnight calls as My way of telling you that, at long last, the time has come for you to share with others your own personal struggle in learning how to walk by faith."

And that's what I did. If I looked tired that Sunday morning, I was. But the fatigue was only physical. Spiritually, I was riding on the front bumper. To have more joy, I would have had to be two people. When the services were over, we all knew God had done something great in our midst. My sharing had been used to fortify others in their faith. The substance of that sharing is

included as part of this chapter, with the hope it will make this subject especially helpful.

The completed Jews to whom the book of Hebrews was originally addressed were having a tough time of it. When they turned from Judaism to Jesus, they laid down, ever so tentatively, the comfortable old security blanket of temple life with its bustling priesthood and carefully structured ritual sacrifice. In place of these visible, physical, religious activities on earth, they substituted the invisible, spiritual ministry of Jesus in heaven. As Christians, their life was to center on things hoped for and unseen. But now they were being pressured from every imaginable angle to revert to the familiar patterns and practices of pre-Christian days.

Could they withstand this pressure? Could they survive and grow strong without the religious props they had once depended upon? Could they hang tough in a hostile world? The writer of Hebrews says, “Yes, provided you walk by faith, not sight.”

Our situation is not dissimilar to theirs. The scenery has changed. We are not asked to forsake animal sacrifices and ritual cleansings. These have never been part of our religious paraphernalia. But we are asked to “*to walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5:7). To move out into a dangerous, difficult world and maintain the keen edge of our Christian commitment and conviction. We are asked to trust God on what strikes some as slim evidence He even is. To walk by faith when the tendency of our time is to play it safe. To venture all for Christ when every secular voice we hear says self-sacrifice is stupid.

How are we to function in such an atmosphere? How are we to keep our goals in focus, our priorities in proper order? We are to do as the ancients did. We are to follow the instruction given to those first-century fledglings. We are to walk by faith, not by sight.

Description, Not Definition

What is faith? It is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1).

It is important to note that what our writer gives us here is a description rather than a definition of faith. A definition is formal and exact. It includes all that belongs to the word being defined. It excludes all that doesn't. A description, on the other hand, is not formal or exact. Nor is it all-inclusive. Rather, it is a word picture which spotlights certain special features of that which is being described. Because our author is more concerned with what faith does than with what faith is, he gives us a description instead of a definition.

The writer of Hebrews sees faith as that fruit of the Spirit which will keep Jesus folk alive and well in a hostile world, without dependency upon visual aids of any kind. Faith will spare us the pain and loss of becoming spiritual dropouts. It will keep us keeping on. Help us run with patience the race set before us. In other words, this entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews must be seen in relationship to the underlying concern which threads throughout the entire book: God's concern that we, His children, persevere in the face of all kinds of pressure.

Elsewhere in scripture we are told how, through other facets of faith, we can stand before God in heaven. Here we are told how, through a mature, triumphant faith, we can stand before men on earth. According to his description, faith enables the Jesus person to know what other people do not know. To believe what mere mortals do not believe. And, to act upon that knowledge and belief.

Faith is not wishful thinking. It is not operating on a hunch. Or hoping for the best. Or acting foolishly when common sense and good judgment dictate otherwise. Faith does not renounce reason. It reaches beyond reason to discover those realities which reason alone can never perceive. Faith does not see what isn't there. It sees all that is there! It knows there is more to life than meets the eye. And, it puts us in touch with those things which, though invisible, are truly real.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (11: 1a). It enables us Jesus people to know with certainty what other folk can only surmise. Best of all, it permits us to experience the reality

of those things for which we hope, here and now. The “*assurance (or realization) of things hoped for*” is nothing more or less than the sure confidence that that which we shall appropriate fully in the future can be experienced and rejoiced in, at least in part, today. Knowing that is knowing what ordinary people do not know: the certainty that the better things for which we long are, in their beginnings, already present, through faith.

Faith is further “*the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1 b). It enables God’s children to believe what mere mortals do not believe. The secular world says seeing is believing. The spiritual world says believing is seeing. Faith operates on the premise that unseen things are not less real than seen things. Love, for instance, is not less real than lead. Sound is not less real than sod. As a matter of fact, it is the conviction of faith that spiritual things are more vital than material things. They are truly real.

Faith provides the Jesus person with convincing proof the unseen world, about which the writer of Hebrews has been talking in chapters 8-10, is the supreme reality. By faith, the soul sees what the eye cannot see. The heart hears what the ear cannot hear. The spirit understands what the mind cannot comprehend. Which is to say, faith empowers the Christian to believe what mere mortals cannot believe: the ultimate reality of things unseen.

But faith is more than knowledge and belief. It involves positive action upon the truth known, and the promise believed. Faith is never idle waiting. It is always belief and knowledge acting. Acting on what? The writer of Hebrews replies: the credibility of God. “*(For) without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11:6).

The reason triumphant faith sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible is because it is rooted in the God of Promises and in the promises of God. Faith is not the stuff of which daydreams are made. Faith is not a stained glass word. Faith is a tough-fibered, bare-knuckled thing which is convinced beyond any possible doubt that God is altogether worthy of our trust. Triumphant faith is not belief in the existence of any god, it is

belief in the existence of the God who makes promises and keeps them!

Lack of faith was the problem of those first-century Jesus folk. It is our problem, too. As a matter of fact, lack of faith has been mankind’s problem from the time of Adam and Eve. Sin is not disobedience, it is disbelief. The opposite of sin is not obedience, it is faith. Obedience is the by-product of a faith relationship. Disobedience is the inevitable result of the fracturing of a faith relationship.

The first sin recorded in Genesis was not Eve’s act of disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit. The original sin was unbelief. Before she ever disobeyed God, Eve disbelieved God. The serpent made more sense to her than the loving Father. She took Satan’s word over that of God, and the sin of disbelief led to disobedience.

That’s why faith is so important to God. That’s why, “*without faith it is impossible to please Him*”(12:6). Faith is the opposite of sin. Faith is that act whereby we venture our eternal interest on the bare word of God, believing Him solely on the basis of what He has said without asking for proof. And until we have given God that kind of unconditional trust, we haven’t really given Him anything.

This is something I learned rather late in life. For most questioning Christians, there are three stages of faith. At the beginning there is the uncritical stage of faith, in which the experience of Jesus is so direct and compelling the questions have not yet had a chance to surface. Then there is the middle, or critical stage of faith, when the questions come faster than the answers. We find the so-called simple gospel is not so simple after all. Finally, there is the post-critical stage when, having been subjected to the fire of testing, faith emerges from the crucible more sturdy than ever before. Like a bone which has been broken, tested faith is stronger once it is healed. Stronger because it refused to run from the questions. Stronger because it was willing to face the darts of doubt. But, while becoming stronger, the period of brokenness and healing can be extremely painful.

It was during a spasm of that middle stage of faith that I came close to quitting the ministry a few years ago. I grew up in a highly rationalistic era when blind faith was widely ridiculed. To believe anything upon pure faith alone was considered unintelligent. Therefore, it was exceedingly important to me that I have a logical, defensible reason, unfettered and unfortified by faith, for the hope which was within me.

I was gripped by a desperate need to know. To have every question answered. Every issue carefully catalogued and pigeonholed with the “proper” response. And, for a number of years I got away with that kind of infantile concept of Christianity. Then, suddenly, for reasons far too complex to detail here, I was catapulted into situations in which I faced questions I could not answer. Issues I could not resolve.

I was in a terrible dilemma. I had not learned to “*walk by faith*,” and I was no longer able to “*walk by sight*.” My carefully structured, neatly pigeonholed caricature of Christianity had been shot out from under me. I was intellectually legless. Immobile. A spiritual paraplegic. Things deteriorated to a point where I actually questioned the existence of God. I didn’t deny Him. I simply awoke one day to discover I no longer believed in Him.

Now, ministers are not supposed to doubt, at least not doubt the existence of God. So I fought off facing the crisis of this middle stage of faith for several months. I went through all the right motions and said all the right words. During this period, people were converted to Christ and the church was blessed. Remember, God’s promise is to honor His word (Isaiah 55:11), not the person who proclaims it. Yet, despite the outward blessings, I was dead inside. Finally, it came to a point where I felt morally and ethically I could no longer take God’s money to tell people what they wanted to hear when I didn’t believe myself. I decided to leave the ministry.

At that point I took Lucille into my confidence for the first time, because a decision of that sort would have a profound effect on her. It would mean loss of income, home, and the minimal

amount of security the ministry affords. In fact, it would result in chaos for our entire family.

I remember vividly the Saturday night I asked her to ride with me into the country. I described the deep distress of soul through which I had been going. She listened empathetically. She didn't preach to me. Or inundate me with proof texts. She shared that she, too, had gone through periods of doubt and promised to pray for me.

The following Sunday morning I went through the first service, and, as I recall, people were converted. But inwardly I was miserable. When worship was over, I rushed into my study, locked the door, put my head on my desk and said, “God, if there is a God, you have one hour to make Yourself real to me. Unless something happens in the next sixty minutes, I shall have to announce at the second service my decision to resign the ministry.”

It's interesting I should have had that kind of conversation. As I reflect upon it now, it indicates I was not an atheist, or even a deist. I was simply caught in the agony and uncertainty of the middle stage of faith. The crisis point for me up to that time was an inability to “*walk by faith*.” I could walk by reason. Or logic. Or sight. But by faith? No! That was impossible.

As I sat there pondering my dilemma, a portion of scripture came to mind. It had been cropping up repeatedly for a number of weeks. “*He who comes to God must believe that He is (exists), and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11 :6b). “But, God, that's my problem,” I argued. “I'm not sure You really are.” And God said, now I didn't hear a voice, but the conversation was as real as any I have ever experienced, “There's more to that verse; please look it up.”

I went to a concordance, searched out a key word, found Hebrews 11:6, and turning to my Bible, read: “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*” Without faith it is impossible to please Him!

My reaction was quick and angry. “Thanks a lot, God! This just makes matters worse. My problem is that I’m short on faith. The very thing You want, is what I can’t give.” Then I asked God a question. “Why is it so important to You that I give You faith?” He answered my question with one of His own. “John, why is it important that your son have faith in you?” I answered, “That’s obvious. If Jeff didn’t have faith in me, there would be no possibility of a meaningful relationship between us. Life would be impossible if every time we sat down to dinner he said, ‘Has anybody run a chemical analysis on this food? Mom, you say it’s fit to eat, but how do I know for sure? Dad, you take the first bite and prove it to me.’ Or suppose he questioned everything I said. Doubted every comment I made. Asked for proof before he would accept the truth of the things I try to teach him. Why, it would be impossible to have any meaningful relationship with my son unless he had faith in me.”

Even as I gave God the answer to His question, I had the answer to my own. “Now I see what You’re trying to tell me, God. You’re saying the reason it isn’t possible to please You without faith is because without faith there isn’t any substance or meaning to our relationship.” I began to realize that until I gave God unconditional faith in the absence of answers, I hadn’t really given Him anything. I had given Him my life. My talent. My money. My family. But, I had not given Him unconditional trust.

Again, I put my head on my desk, “God, if there is a God, from this point on I surrender the need to know. By a deliberate act of the will, I commit myself to walk by faith, not sight.” As I continued to pray, I was at first surrounded, and then ultimately filled, with an overwhelming sense of the reality of God. I was gripped by “*the conviction of things not seen*,” and given an assurance that God is, which has not left from that day to this.

For decades I had tried to come to terms with my doubt. That morning I decided to come to terms with my faith. As a result, I passed from the desperate agony of questions I could not answer, to the exquisite joy of answers I cannot escape. And it has been wonderful!

I don't mean to imply all my problems were over. To the contrary. Since then I have faced the severest tests of my lifetime. I have made many serious mistakes. On occasion, I have gravely strained my fellowship with God. But, there has never been one moment when I doubted my relationship to God. I am convinced that, in His foreknowledge, my heavenly Father knew of the crises ahead, and prepared me for them in advance by permitting me to go through that earlier, agonizing middle stage of faith in which I learned beyond any shadow of doubt that God is, and that He “*rewards those who earnestly seek Him*” (12:6).

Like a bone which has been broken, tested faith is stronger once it is healed. It surrenders the need to know and in the process knows as never before. It gives up a dependency on proof and winds up with a form of proof which boggles the mind. It ventures everything on the bare word of God and discovers that this, though it defies reason, is altogether reasonable.

Faith, as the writer of Hebrews asserts, boils down to confidence in the credibility of God. Confidence in His living and written word for knowledge about Himself, rather than our own reasoned arguments. Confidence in His grace for the forgiveness of sin, rather than our own feeble efforts to right the wrongs. Confidence in His loving us, rather than our loving Him. In His choosing us, rather than our choosing Him.

Faith rests in God. In His hold on us, rather than our hold on Him. Faith knows and believes, but it also acts on what it knows and believes, and in the process, possesses “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1). As someone has said, “In the life of faith, proof and practice go hand in hand. The proof of faith is in the living of faith.”

Demonstration

From this beautiful description, our author moves on to a demonstration of faith. Many commentators have written extensively and well about the people, places and events mentioned in the remaining thirty-nine verses of chapter 11.

It will not be necessary for me to do so. Suffice it to say, these verses are laced with rich veins of spiritual ore which will readily yield their treasure to the patient and prayerful student.

I should only like to point out that the folk mentioned here were not selected at random nor picked by accident. The Holy Spirit guided this listing, because all of these people had certain things in common. Not the least of these was the fact that they had gone through the very things those first-century believers were being asked to go through. To leave the familiar and comfortable. To adventure into the unknown. To live with a minimum of security. To court danger and invite hostility. To go forward on the bare word of God. And, by faith, they had done just that.

The facets of faith which carried them through are those described by the writer of Hebrews. They believed in the God of promises, “*that He is (exists)*” (11 :6b). They also believed in the promises of God, “*that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11 :6c). Though the promises God gave them were all in the future, these people acted as if they were already operational. Thus they had the joy of doing and being something great for God. They experienced “*the assurance (or realization) of things hoped for*” (11:1 a). They believed there is more to life than meets the eye. They possessed “*the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1b). As a result, they were able to hang tough in a hostile world in the face of all kinds of logical and appealing reasons not to do so.

But the most endearing thing they had in common with those first-century Jesus folk, was their humanity. Not one of these people was perfect. They all had character flaws. Several were cunning connivers. One was a harlot. All were most unlikely candidates for sainthood. Without exception, they stumbled and fell. But, they did not stay down. Despite their humanity and hang-ups, they refused to roll over and play dead for the devil. When they were

down, they got up. When they were going the wrong direction, they did an about-face. When they pushed ahead of God and fouled up His program, they got back in His will and out of His way. They could have dropped out, but they didn't. In the face of insurmountable problems and unbelievable obstacles, by faith they pushed on. They hung tough in a hostile world.

If they could do it, so can you, says the author of Hebrews. To be sure, you're being asked to make major sacrifices for your Christian faith. To break with everything comfortable and familiar. To risk alienation from family and friends. To adventure into the unknown with no guarantee of safe return. But, this is nothing new. The history of God's working with His children is crowded with those who *“walked by faith, not sight.”* People who had nothing but the promises of God to go on and yet went forth, not knowing where they were going or what they would find when they got there. They came to their extremity and found it to be God's opportunity. They stepped out in blind faith and proved God to be altogether worthy of their trust. If you will take a similar leap of faith, he says, you, too, will hang tough in a hostile world.

Deduction

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).

This is the conclusion toward which our author has been pointing from the opening line of his letter. Underlying every carefully honed argument and

patiently polished phrase is his practical concern for the spiritual survival of God's earthly offspring. If you miss the “So what?” element which pops up again and again throughout this epistle, you miss the primary thrust of the book. The whole argument is lost unless you realize we are told who Jesus is and what Jesus did in order that we might avoid the ten deadly dangers of:

Drift instead of decision (2:1-4)

Hardened hearts instead of help in time of need (3:7—4:16)

Spiritual infantilism instead of Christian growth (5:11—6:3)

Laxity instead of loyalty (6:4-20; 10:26-31; 12:15-17)

Wavering instead of boldness (10:19-23)

Isolationism instead of fellowship (10:24,25)

Weariness instead of endurance (10:26-39)

Comfort instead of discipline (12:1-11)

Dull indifference instead of grateful response (12:25-29)

Expediency instead of eternity (13:1-15)

God is concerned about the spiritual survival and success of His children. He has used the writer of Hebrews in a remarkable way to provide Christian earthlings with the necessary fortification to stand against the storm. To keep on day after day after day. Whether we're successful or not. Whether we're appreciated or not. Whether we're recognized or not. For, as the song says, “This world is not our home, we're just a passin' through.”

Others have run the same race. Abraham. Moses. Samuel. David. The prophets. The list goes on and on. They all persisted in faith and are now in the great grandstand of heaven rooting us on. They are not passive onlookers. They are intimately and personally involved in the outcome. Until all have finished the race, none shall receive the prize (11:39,40).

But along with this quite proper personal concern, there is an overriding interest in the ultimate outcome of the whole event. Relay runners, having passed the baton to those who run succeeding

laps, do not lose interest in what happens after they have had their run. Instead, they are concerned that all run well for the sake of the corporate effort. The “*great cloud of witnesses*” in glory share the same concern. They join Jesus in keen concern that we, too, “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (12:1b).

Furthermore, this “*cloud of witnesses*” are not mere spectators. Their supreme purpose as rooters is to witness to us as runners. Rather than their looking at us, we are to look at them. We are to remember the many dangers, toils and snares through which they, by faith, have already come. We are to remember how they learned to “*lay aside every weight*” which might hinder faith.

Most important of all, we are never, never, never to forget how, through faith, they conquered the sin which clings so closely, the ever present temptation to quit before the race is done. That’s “*the sin which doth so easily beset us*” (12:1, KJV). It’s the sin of slipping back. Of dropping out. Of failing to “hang tough in a hostile world.”

This sin is mentioned repeatedly in Hebrews. Again and again, we are warned against it. The Christian life is not a sprint. It is an endurance run. It requires sustained commitment, lest in falling by the wayside, we lose the satisfaction of doing well while the race is on and also miss the prize to be awarded when the race is done.

Therefore, those who were witnessed of in Hebrews 11 are now witnesses in Hebrews 12 to those of us still on the course. We are challenged to survey the achievements of these past heroes of faith, and to learn by their example. To face our contest with similar concentration and endurance. And, if this “*great cloud of witnesses*” does not provide sufficient fortification against fatigue, despondency and collapse, we have the privilege of “*fixing our eyes on Jesus*” (12:2).

Don’t you love the way the writer of Hebrews never misses an opportunity to slip in his favorite theme! Even when making a practical application, he can’t resist the temptation to put in a good word for Jesus. “*The author and perfecter of faith*” (12:2b). The One who has the first word and

the last. “*The Alpha and the Omega*” (Revelation 1:8), Who will never be superseded as either Savior or Keeper!

The author of Hebrews says, “If all other motivation fails, and you are still strongly tempted to give up the race, look to Jesus who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured far greater strain than you shall ever know. He now roots for you so that you, too, may share His joy and crown.”

Is your reaction, “Big deal! Why shouldn’t He be able to stick it out? Jesus was God”? True. God was in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). But no mention is made here of that part of His person. It is Jesus to Whom we are to look, not Christ. That’s an important distinction. Christ is the name used to describe His deity. Jesus is the name used to depict His humanity. And it is Jesus to Whom we are to look. Jesus, the true Man, who, by faith which is the opposite of sin, obeyed, endured, and gained the victory.

With what incredible care the Holy Spirit has guided the mind of His earthly scribe! He has taken pains to guard so small a detail as the very name of the One to Whom we are to look for power to persevere. We are to look to Jesus, who as true man is a picture in living color of what we can be through faith.

In a roundabout way, this brings us back to the basic meaning of faith. It is confidence in another. It is knowing God exists. It is believing He is absolutely worthy of our trust. It is acting upon that knowledge and belief to keep on keeping on, come what may. That is the way to enjoy the present reality of “*things hoped for*” and possess the sure conviction that the truly real and dependable is often “*not seen*.”

During the London blitz, a father took his little girl to a bomb shelter. The ladder was broken, so he jumped down and stood in the darkness below. It was pitch-black. The child, who was still at the top, couldn’t see him, though he could make her out dimly against the night sky. “Jump, dear, jump,” he called. She responded with great anxiety, “But, Daddy, I can’t see you. I can’t see

you.” “Yes, darling, I know. But I can see you. Now, jump!” So, in faith, she leaped into the darkness, to discover she had leaped into the strong security of her father’s arms.

Are you inundated by doubt? Are you tempted to quit the race? You can hang tough in this hostile world if you’ll just take the leap of faith. I promise you, from personal experience, you won’t be disappointed.