

Hebrews 12:1-3

Consider Him

As we move into chapter 12 of Hebrews, the writer moves from the OT people of faith to the sufferings and achievement of the greatest example of all, our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ had warned his disciples when he was physically with them that they would be persecuted by political and religious authorities and that there would be times when anyone who killed them would think he was doing God's service. On the other hand, the writer and pastor has encouraged the persecuted believers, as Christ also did, with the double promise:

- The presence of the Lord is with them in all circumstances. They might be enabled to do great things like the people of Hebrews 11:33-35 who achieved great things ... Or they might be more like "Others ..." who suffered and were killed (35-38) Either way, by faith they were enabled to conquer.

- They will receive a rich reward. **"Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."** (Hebrews 10:35,36)

Another encouragement to these early believers and to us is that we are **"surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses"**. It is as if we are running the race in a stadium and there is this crowd of former contestants who have completed the race, who are witnesses to the faithfulness of God, who testify that faith is worth it. We must now run the race, but we have their example to inspire us. Of them it can be said, as it was of Abel (11:4):

"By faith he still speaks, even though he is dead."

These people are not merely spectators; they cheer us on by their example. There is:

- Enoch, who lived so close to God that the verdict on his life was that he walked with God;

- Abraham, who set out without knowing where he was going, looking forward to a city whose architect and builder is God;
- Moses, who turned his back on a life of power and luxury to suffer affliction with the people of God

The cloud of witnesses includes all those mentioned in chapter 11, but it also includes those who led the Hebrew Christians to faith in Christ (Hebrews 13:7):

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”

Isn't it great sometimes to look back and thank God for all those who have been an example to us of how faith in Christ enables us to run the race? They too are part of the great cloud of witnesses.

I would like to look at the 3 verses we read under 3 headings, the first one being:

What we must reject (12:1)

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

The athlete has to train hard for the race. In the ancient Greek games, the athlete would train to make his body lean. Then, before the race, he would strip off his long clothes to run naked.

Anything which might slow him down or get in his way had to be got rid of, be it excess weight or weighty garments.

When we try to apply this to our own lives, that's where it becomes tricky for several reasons:

- It's much easier for me to see your faults than to see my own;
- The things which hinder vary so much from person to person
- Each of us needs to look at the things in our own lives and ask; “Is this a help or a hindrance in the Christian race?”

There are so many things which are not bad in themselves but which can hold us back from pressing on with the Lord – things like

friendships, hobbies, entertainment, career ambitions or habits. Something which is a harmless way to relax for one person may for someone else be an obsession which takes them away from following the Lord and engaging with other people.

And then there is “**the sin which so easily entangles**”. Now we sometimes give a lot of attention what we might call the Spectacular sins. But Jesus often drew attention to the subtle sins which entangle just as much. To take just one example, Jesus got so angry about the sin of hypocrisy. (If you think I am exaggerating, read Matthew 23). Some of his harshest words were reserved for those whose lives were apparently faultless and whose religious observance was perfect. But he hated

- The way they made sure everyone noticed how good they were,
- The way they made themselves look important,

- the way they excluded from God’s kingdom ordinary people who wanted to get in,
- The way they kept all their regulations and ignored the one rule which mattered, the law of love.

They were like people who buy all the right athletic gear, the latest equipment and go to the gym, not to get fit but to pose. They are not ready for the race.

We have a race to run, a course marked out by God for these few short years of our lives on earth. We cannot afford to become distracted or entangled.

How we should run the race

“Let us run with perseverance/ endurance the race marked out for us”

There are so many things which can distract us and put us off as we run the race.

- Sometimes we can be put off by other Christians because we think to ourselves “Well, if he claims to be a Christian and behaves like that ...”

- Sometimes we let ourselves down and we become depressed at our inability to stop repeating the same old mistakes.
- Sometimes we pay too much attention to people who give us poor advice or teaching and allow that to draw us off course.

Paul, writing to the Galatians expresses his surprise:

“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?”

(Galatians 5:7)

The race we are involved in is the marathon and it requires perseverance.

Where we must look

The pastor here puts in a nutshell the secret of the Christian faith:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus”

This is the encouragement we need for our faith, to fix our eyes not on the world around us with its enticements and threats, not on ourselves with our accomplishments and failures, but on Jesus.

Where your eyes are focussed says a lot about where our minds are set. I used to do a little experiment when I was a teacher faced with a new first year class. As I was talking to the class I would move to and fro at the front and watch to see those whose eyes followed me and those who were already gazing into space or out of the window. Which reminds me of a colleague who once wrote on a pupil’s report: “He thinks that a classroom is a place with windows”!

Let us look in various ways at Jesus, the focus of our faith

Jesus, the compassionate man

The human name given to our Lord is Jesus.

The human Jesus has experienced our adversities. When we feel that we cannot summon up any more energy for “the race that is set before us”, we should think of the race which was set before him, which was incomparably more difficult than ours. Jesus triumphed, and in his strength so can we.

Jesus, the pioneer

The word translated *author* in the NIV would perhaps be better translated as *pioneer* or *forerunner*. By faith, Abraham was able to make the supreme sacrifice; by faith, Moses was able to give up his privileged position and ultimately deliver his people. If the people of the OT are lights of faith, Jesus on the cross is a blazing sun bringing faith to its highest expression.

Jesus, the perfecter

Like Paul in his letter to the Philippians, we can be sure that:

“He who began this good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” Phil. 1:6

Jesus is the one who brings to completion our faith. God is faithful and does not leave his work half done. He takes time, like a sculptor working at a masterpiece. As someone has pointed out; Jesus could make the blind see – instantly; he could make the lame walk – immediately; but even Jesus had to work hard

on his disciples for 3 years, and even then he was far from finished. Be patient with me – God is still at work.

Jesus, the one who endured the cross

Here is an amazing statement, that Jesus “for the joy set before him endured the cross”. We can see this joy in a number of ways. Jesus repeatedly throughout his life spoke of his joy in doing his Father’s will. This verse tells us that he also looked forward to his reunion with his Father in heaven. He rejoiced too in the knowledge that his death would buy back his people from the power of Satan. By faith he could see that beyond the cross lay a crown, and so he “endured the cross, despising the shame”.

Jesus, the high priest we can approach

Hebrews 4:14-16 reminds us that Jesus is approachable, unlike the Jewish high priests who could not be approached by ordinary people. He has been tempted in every way just as we are, but without sinning. Sometimes in the Christian life, the sin which so easily

entangles slows us down in the Christian race, it spoils our relationship with our fellow believers and grieves our Lord. And it is particularly at such times that we need to “fix our eyes on Jesus”, knowing that he sympathises with us but has not got dragged down and can therefore help.

Jesus the enthroned Lord

Jesus is, in the picture language of the NT, “at the right hand of God”. He is in the position of universal power, awaiting the great moment when every person who has ever lived will acknowledge that he is Lord. The first century believers were about to move from a position where they were unwelcome to one where they were physically assaulted, imprisoned and tortured. They needed to be reassured that behind and above Caesar and his local governors stood someone who ultimately held control. Many of them stood firm like the aged Polycarp, who, when faced with the choice between burning a little incense and saying the words “Caesar is Lord”, instead said this: “For

86 years I have served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” The old man, like so many of the early Christians, went to his death knowing by faith that his frail life was in the strong hands of Jesus the enthroned Lord.

Jesus the patient sufferer

The final exhortation in this passage is this:

“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”.

What! Christians grow weary and lose heart? Yes, I’m afraid it happens often, especially when we are faced with a prolonged difficulty or trial. The cure is to consider Jesus in his struggle against the opposition of men. We should meditate on Jesus’ life and death, see how it relates to our struggle, remember that God was in control and was working out his plan in Jesus’ life for his glory and remember also that beyond the cross lay a crown.

And the same thing applies to his people. Paul, who knew a thing or two about suffering, wrote

these words in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 which sum up much of what we have been learning from Hebrews:

“We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes, not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. ”

How do we consider Jesus?

- We reflect on what the Bible teaches us about him.
- We look back into the OT and we see how Jesus is foreshadowed and represented by the people of faith
- We look at the NT at the Gospels, and we see God’s plan taking shape as Jesus commits himself fully into his Father’s loving hands and how God delivers him

- We read the Epistles where the significance of Jesus’ birth, life death and resurrection are explained

And as we do so, do we not feel, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who met and talked to the risen Jesus, our hearts burning within us and do we not find renewed strength for the race?