

**Hebrews 11:1, 29-12:2 (NLT2)** <sup>1</sup> Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. <sup>29</sup>It was by faith that the people of Israel went right through the Red Sea as though they were on dry ground. But when the Egyptians tried to follow, they were all drowned. <sup>30</sup>It was by faith that the people of Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and the walls came crashing down. <sup>31</sup>It was by faith that Rahab the prostitute was not destroyed with the people in her city who refused to obey God. For she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. <sup>32</sup>How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. <sup>33</sup>By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their loved ones back again from death. But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. <sup>37</sup>Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated. <sup>38</sup>They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. <sup>40</sup>For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us. <sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. <sup>2</sup> We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The Christian life is often compared to a race. Acts 20:24 "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Gal 5:7 "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" 2 Tim 4:7 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Heb 12:1, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Yes, in the Bible following Jesus as his disciple is compared to being in a race that lasts until the day you die.

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This does not mean that you and I live every day at a frantic pace. It does not mean we try to knock everyone down in front of us so we can pass them and leave them in the dust. It is not a sprint where you run short distances as fast as you can run. No, it is a race that we call long distance running, a marathon, where you learn to pace yourself so you can endure and persevere in Jesus Christ and never stop until the Lord stops you. The race that we enter is one of continued reliance and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a life-long walk with the Lord Jesus Christ following His lead on every step. The race is choosing to love the Lord Jesus and living by faith in Him.

These days there are professional articles after articles being written of why pastors are dropping out of the ministry or retiring earlier than planned. I hear of these stories all the time of pastors who are exceptionally gifted and talented dropping out of the ministry. Many of them leaving the ministry are much younger than I am. The ministry isn't what they expected it to be, and they got so tired of the race that they had to drop out before the ministry did them in. They lost their ability to pace themselves for the difficult days and could no longer endure or persevere. They are completely exhausted and can no longer cope with the daily demands. A pastor friend of mine has a huge ministry to pastors who have burned out.

To be honest, I am not being critical of these pastors. What is true of them can be true of any believer. We grow tired and weary of doing good. We get tired of always having to be obedient. We get tired of trying to be strong in the faith to those around us. Our inner resources get depleted. This sinful and evil world drains us, and it can be difficult to take the next step.

When I was in my early 20's I heard Howard Hendricks say, "It's nearly impossible to find Christians in the church totally on fire for Jesus Christ who are over 50." If you are over 50, now is not the time to leave the race. Now is the time to stay in the race or get back into the race and

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run with perseverance and endurance the race that God has set before us. Quit feeling sorry for yourself.

I have learned the older one gets, the more there is to complain about. There are more aches and pains, more family struggles, more financial problems, more problems at work, more years that the Cubs don't win the World Series, more bad news about one's health, and the politics always gets worse the longer you live. This world becomes a pretty dark place and God tells us, quit your whining, quit your complaining, I have all that you need. Seek me and you will find me. Call upon me and I will answer. Get back into the race for I have much for you to do. Don't lose hope but cling to me, trust in me, rely on me. My grace is sufficient for you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

My lifetime friend, Robert Blessing, Bob for short, (Bob, I hope you get that) spent three tours in Iraq and had experiences that would not be right for me to speak of in public. I met him in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Some of you met him when he preached at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my ordination. I know of no one more on fire for Christ than Bob. He is a tongue speaking, baptized in the Holy Spirit, charismatic Episcopal priest with the spiritual gift of evangelism and a straight A student. He is on the short side, but I have always looked up to Bob and always will. On top of that he is a long-distance runner and excelled in cross country in high school.

I do not want to talk about what he experienced but was it ever tempting for him to quit the race and go another direction. His PTSD had a huge impact on Bob, more than anyone I know. And when I saw him, I was absolutely shocked at what I saw. I knew of his pain, so I expected there to be very little light in him and possibly despair. But what I saw was a man who had suffered severely, more than anyone in this room except our veterans, and I saw a man who had endured and persevered in Jesus Christ. He looked battle weary but full of a vigorous faith in Jesus Christ. There was that profound light of Jesus Christ still radiating from his eyes.

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He could have given up, but instead he persevered. He is still in the race that Jesus has set before him. We prayed for Bob during his tours. It is these prayers that helped him persevere and still does. He said to me on the phone, "We cannot make it on our own." We need each other, especially the prayers of God's faithful people.

Hebrews 11 is all about living by faith. **1. Faith is that inner assurance and conviction that God is who He says He is, and that God's promises are true.** This list of people that is found in the Hall of Fame chapter accomplished great things for God, but none of these people saw the Savior or knew of the ministry of the cross of Jesus Christ. **2. They lived by faith in the promise of the coming Messiah that was first given to Abraham.** In other words, because we have the full Bible and they did not, we know more about God than they did. They were trusting in a future promise. They clung to a future promise. They relied completely on a future promise. You and I know the fulfillment of that promise for we read of it in the Gospels and today we know far more about Jesus than they ever did. For it is Jesus who makes the life of faith possible.

Sometimes I hear words like this. Pastor, it is so hard to believe and have faith in Christ when I see ... and then they tell me of an extreme difficult circumstance. Or I am fed up with God for God did not ... and then they tell me where they feel like God has let them down. There are a lot of us in this room who find the life of faith not so easy at times.

**3. This chapter was given to us by God to instruct us, to increase our perseverance, to encourage you to never lose hope.** Hope is an eager expectation for what God has guaranteed. Faith and hope go hand in hand and when you know ever so deeply the love of God in your soul, you will persevere and stay in the race until the day God takes you home.

In verses 29 through the first part of verse 35 we read of tremendous victories of God's people overcoming insurmountable odds and being victorious by faith. It is rather exciting to read this. Then the tide changes in verse 35. "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise to a better life. Others 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, and mistreated, of whom the world was not worthy.

Personally, I would much rather read about the people who were victorious over such suffering. Those that suffered so much at the end of the list, does that mean God loved them less. Does that mean God wasn't quite as faithful to them as to those who were victorious? Does it mean those in the first part of the list had stronger faith and those that suffered such atrocities had less faith? The answer is, not at all. All of them knew God's faithfulness. All of them knew of God's great love, and all of them knew that God's promises are fulfilled in their greatest degree after the Lord takes us home. Therefore, we run the race with endurance until the end for then the greatest fulfillment of God's promises will be experienced. We live by faith and never give up. We set our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. The Father who did not spare his own Son from the worst of suffering proves to us that you can have the greatest of faith and still suffer mightily. Faith does not eliminate suffering. Jesus endured because of the promise of joy set before Him, specifically the resurrection and the ascension.

As a Christian you and I see things the world does not see. We have a sense of heaven, the afterlife. We have a sense of God's goodness. We know His love deeply. We know our sins are forgiven. We know His Word is true and can be relied upon. We know that Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us. We know that God strengthens our faith as we take in the bread and the wine. We know that whatever happens to us, God will work together for good. As Corrie Ten

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Boom writes the words of her sister Betsy, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is deeper still." Faith is built on God's perfect truth and the perfect truth is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is entirely trustworthy always. These saints who suffered for the faith, suffered clinging to a promise they did not see until after they died.

**4. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that did not cave into discouragement or non-belief but remained faithful unto death and received the crown of life.** They finished the race and God awarded their faithful endurance.

The church of Jesus Christ today needs people to get their eyes off themselves and onto the Lord Jesus. It is the only way to persevere. "You are loved with an everlasting love and underneath are the everlasting arms." Amen and Amen.