

An Enduring Faith

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Preacher: Dr. Jeff Rankin

[0:00] Good morning. It is my pleasure to be here with you this morning. I want to make sure to take a moment and thank Pastor Daniel for the invitation to come and to deliver this message to you this morning.

I met Pastor Daniel about a year ago when I was serving as the interim dean of the College of Christian Studies. He brought, I believe, his daughter for one of our preview days, an opportunity for her to see the campus and think about maybe if North Greenville was a place for her.

And we met and we've gotten to know each other a little bit, but very thrilled when he contacted me a few weeks ago and asked me if I'd be available to fill the pulpit for him today.

I want to make sure and thank him because having been a pastor myself, I know how important it is in choosing the right people to fill the pulpit. And it's quite a privilege for me that he would entrust me with this opportunity.

And so I'm praising the Lord for it and asking the Lord to help me to be faithful in delivering this message to you today. I invite you to take your Bibles this morning and turn with me in the New Testament to the book of Hebrews.

[1:14] We'll be actually reading in a moment from chapter 12. That's where the text for the sermon will be. But I want you to turn to chapter 10 because I'm going to work my way up to, in the argument of this letter, really, maybe even a sermon, into chapter 10 to set the stage for our message there in chapter 12.

And so if you'll turn there in just a moment, we'll be looking at that. Imagine a place and a time in the ancient world where it was costly to follow Jesus.

Imagine the religious and cultural pressures against those who would seek to follow him. Those who would seek to keep them from making that choice or to turn them back from following Christ. Now imagine a respected Christian leader, maybe even a pastor, sitting down to pen a sermon in the form of a letter that he would send to a group of these Christians, encouraging them to endure the pressures they faced.

If you can imagine those ideas, then you have a little bit of a grasp of the background of what we call the letter to the Hebrews. And so this morning I want to talk to you about what I'm calling an enduring faith.

[3:03] It's the title of my sermon and it's the content of the letter of Hebrews. This group of Christians facing the difficulties of their day and being encouraged and challenged to endure.

I would say that in many ways this letter was not written directly to us. The author had this particular group of Christians in mind there in the ancient world.

But the Holy Spirit was working behind the scenes to inspire him to write this letter. And as I look at the letter and the challenges of enduring faith, I find they're not that radically different than the challenges we're facing today.

I see in our own day religious and cultural pressures that would seek us to turn away from following Jesus.

That would keep us from sharing the gospel with the people around us. We're living in a time in America that I never thought I would see. A time when although we still have the right to freedom of religion and freedom of speech, many believers refused to share the gospel openly with those around them for fear of retribution.

[4:21] We're living in a time that's not unlike the Greco-Roman world the author of Hebrews was addressing. Situations that we face that cause us to question whether we ought to speak or not.

And those pressures are very real and very difficult. So this morning as we're looking at Hebrews, I want us to think, although we're not the original ancient audience, God is speaking directly to us

through this text by the inspiration of his spirit.

And helping us to face the challenges of our own day in a way that will allow the gospel to go forward unhindered. I want to share very quickly two differences about this letter we call the Hebrews.

First of all, all of the other letters of the New Testament, we have what's called an addressee. In other words, the author indicates specifically to whom he was writing.

We could go back and look at several of the letters that precede this letter that starts the final collection known as the general epistles. And we could find churches specifically named that were to receive the letter written.

[5:33] We could find specific individuals who were addressed in letters. Even after this letter's position, we can find specific addressees. But in Hebrews, we don't know who wrote the letter.

And scholars have debated for many years who that could be. And there are several alternatives. Let's just say, however, no one knows for sure who wrote it. A second difference with this letter is we don't know exactly who the letter is addressing.

We don't have the name of a church or a person. We don't have an author and we don't have an addressee. And so we're left at a loss to understand fully the context behind the letter.

One thing we can do, however, is to look at the context of the letter and begin to put together an idea, at least, about who the author had in mind.

And so as we begin to do that, we notice immediately he's writing to Jewish Christians. And not just any Jewish Christians, but those who would be a part of the synagogue in the Greco-Roman world and from what we call a Hellenistic Jewish background.

[6:42] In other words, they were Greek-born and Greek-speaking and had studied the Greek translation of the Old Testament extensively, a testament known as the Septuagint.

So they were very familiar with the text of Scripture and the author quotes quite frequently from the Septuagint in his letter. He expects them to know what he's talking about.

He expects them to be well-versed in the understanding of this Greek Old Testament. A second thing we can discern by looking back is this group of Christians has experienced some radical, radical persecution at times.

And they've become discouraged by it. And it appears they're about to again experience further persecution. And the author wants to encourage them to remain faithful as they continue to experience these struggles.

We can see two strategies in the letter, at least. The first of these is that the author traces out what we might call the greater or better nature of Jesus in regard to the Jewish leaders and figures that we find in the Old Testament.

[8:02] Very familiar chapter, chapter 11, sometimes called the faith chapter or the hall of faith. He's going to trace out all of these different people who serve the Lord well.

But he's going to do it even more so throughout the letter. Starting in chapter 1, the idea is that Jesus is greater than or better than all of these.

And so if we were looking in chapter 1, we'd find the beginning of the letter. God, in many ways and at various times, has spoken to us and to the fathers by the prophets.

But in these last days, he's spoken to us by a son. And so Jesus is greater than the previous messengers of God, those prophets who had spoken on behalf of God, because he's the son. And not only is he the son, but God created all things through him. And so we might say he's the creator of all things, echoing perhaps John's gospel in chapter 1.

[9:03] And Jesus has actually completed his work and taken a position of preeminence by sitting down at the right hand of God.

From which position he upholds the world by the word of his power. Jesus is better than those early religious leaders, those prophets who spoke for God.

But he's also better than the angels. In fact, the author says, to whom did God ever say? To which of the angels did he say, you are my son.

Today I have begotten you. Jesus is better than the prophets. He's better than the angels. Quite surprisingly, perhaps, to a Jewish person in that day, he's better than Moses.

Moses was like a faithful servant in the house, but Jesus is the heir of the house itself. He's the one to whom all belongs and to whom all honor is due.

[10:12] Jesus is actually better or greater than Israel. Called in Exodus the firstborn son of God, but Jesus is better or greater than Israel.

He's been tempted in all points like a man and yet without sin. He's better or greater than the Aaronic priesthood.

The priesthood that descended from Moses' brother Aaron. He's better or greater than that priesthood because he doesn't have to offer sacrifices for his own sins as they did.

And he can come and intercede on behalf of God, opening up a way for those who trust in him to come in to the very throne room of God to find help and mercy and grace in time of need.

Jesus is better or greater than the priesthood and the sacrificial system which they administered.

Jesus is better than the covenant God made with Israel, that first covenant.

[11:22] He's actually the mediator of a new covenant. When he offers sacrifices, he does so in the heavenly tabernacle, not in the earthly one.

In fact, Jesus' sacrifice is so much greater than the sacrifices of the Old Testament that when he offered himself, and by the way, the sinless, spotless lamb of God, when he offered himself, he did so in contrast to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.

You may be familiar with this. In the wilderness, in the tabernacle, and later in the temple in Jerusalem, every morning and every evening, they offered burnt offerings, sacrifices to God to atone for or to cover the sins of the people, to make them temporarily holy that they might be able to dwell in the presence of a holy God every morning and every evening.

In fact, the author of Hebrews says when speaking of these sacrifices that were offered every morning and evening, he says, the blood of bulls and goats never really could take away sin.

But, when Jesus offered himself for sin, he did it one time for all sin.

[12:48] Think about that just for a second. How much greater a sacrifice could Jesus give than to be the one sacrifice for all time that would pay for sin?

And so we find again and again the author pointing us to this idea that Jesus is greater, Jesus is better. Ultimately, it brings us to the faith chapter and to our text today where Jesus ultimately is even better or greater than all the figures of faith in chapter 11.

He's the pioneer and perfecter of faith. And so one of his strategies then is to trace out how Jesus is greater than everything else in the Jewish religion.

But a second strategy is to offer warnings to those who consider turning back from following Jesus. And we have through the book of Hebrews several warnings.

I want to touch on one in chapter 10. So now, let's now pick up in chapter 10 just for a moment and read a little bit of the chapter in preparation for our message in chapter 12.

[13:51] We're going to begin reading in verse 32 of Hebrews 10. This also gives us probably the clearest picture of the audience of the letter. But remember the former days when after being enlightened you endured a great conflict of suffering.

Partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.

for you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward for you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised.

And now quoting from the Greek Old Testament verse 37 for yet in a very little while he who is coming will come and will not delay but my righteous one shall live by faith and if he shrinks back my soul has no pleasure in him.

[15:18] But notice here verse 39 key part of his argument but we are not of those who shrink back to destruction but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

Here's his warning through the message of Habakkuk the prophet in the Old Testament he says it's by faith that we're able to live this life and face these struggles and endure in our faith.

He says very clearly we including himself we have need of endurance so having done the will of God we may receive what was promised. Can I just add to the we in this chapter?

It's not just the author and his audience but today the we includes us. We have need of endurance so we might receive the promise that God made to us the reward that he offers for our faithful lives in service to him as the divine king.

And that brings us up to chapter 11 where we then begin to look at all of these faithful people through the ages. It's almost like a survey of the Old Testament just in one chapter and we touch on all of these familiar names and we think about all of the ways by faith they serve the Lord.

[16:40] and it brings us all the way up to chapter 12 where we now will connect with our text for the message today beginning in verse 1. I'm going to ask you if you are physically able to stand with me now as I read our text for the sermon and as we pray over the message.

Hebrews chapter 12 beginning in verse 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 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 will not grow weary and lose heart let's pray father father we thank you for this day and the opportunity to come together in this place to glorify and exalt the name of

Jesus to praise the one who is greater than all that came before and all that come after he is the one to whom all of our allegiance is due and so today God I pray that your spirit will have freedom to work in and through this congregation Lord I recognize my full dependence on you Lord there's nothing I can say that could change any heart but Lord your spirit through the words you give me to speak God I believe you can make an impact for eternity right here today in this room and so I invite your spirit to come and Lord empower me give me a clear mind give me clear words Lord give me a clear message and then by your spirit apply it to the lives of each one here Lord we want to live in a way that honors you and God we pray that you will help us to have an enduring faith that your good will be done in and through us we pray this in Jesus name for his sake amen you may be seated I want to show you three elements of the text here the first three verses in Hebrews chapter 12 the first element I want to address is what I'm going to call enduring faith pictured enduring faith pictured look at verse 1 again in chapter 12 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 let us run with endurance the race that is set before us the author here is following a very common pattern in the Greco-Roman world not only among Christians but even among secular authors of the day and that is to use the concept or picture of a race as a way of describing life running a race and responding to the challenges of that race now if you take a good look at me

I think you'll agree I haven't run too many races lately in fact I don't know if I've ever run a race officially and I don't think I could run a race right now in my physical condition getting a little older not a great runner last time I ran anything with sprints and high school football maybe some of you suffered through August two-a-days and ran sprints at some point in your life so I struggle a little bit with the picture I don't know what it's like to run a race but I do generally understand what races are about even though I haven't run one and I've seen some of the things that people who are part of a race will do in fact I had a friend in college who was a part of a Christian group there at our university he was a competitive cyclist first met him I got to know him one night at one of our Christian group meetings I just happened to notice he didn't have any hair on his arms and I thought that was a little odd a couple of meetings later he was wearing short pants and I noticed he didn't have any hair on his legs well I couldn't resist and so I went over to him and I said

[21:32] I'm not trying to offend you but I'm curious you don't have any body hair I mean other than the hair on your head what's the deal and he said well I'm a competitive cyclist and he said I shave all of the hair off of my body because it could slow me down it could be a drag on me as I compete in a cycling contest and I wear on my head a very tight cap that smooths out that part of my body even though I don't shave it off it allows me to do the same thing well to be honest with you I thought that was a little weird a little disconcerting that a man had no body hair but for him it wasn't an option he wanted to compete well he wanted to win the race and if body hair was going to slow him down guess what was going to happen to body hair it was gone look in the text here what does the author of Hebrews tell us to do well first of all he tells us we have a great cloud of witnesses and these are those in chapter 11 these part of the great hall of faith people by the way who've already run the race and completed it and so as we look back to them we actually see first of all is it possible to run this race and be successful and the answer is yes it is look at all of these examples of people by faith who ran this race and they're here now not so much to watch us run as to give testimony and witness to the fact that this race can be run and won so the cloud of witnesses there

that see us and testify to us we can run this race this race but notice what he says continuing let us lay aside every encumbrance my friend that was a cyclist thought of body hair as an encumbrance and so he laid it aside and the sin which so easily entangles us there are things in this cursed world that hold us back that hold us down that don't let us run the race to the best of our ability you know what it might be a particular sin that you're struggling with that's holding you back it might be as it was in my life at one time something that you've actually made an idol you might not even know it's an idol in your life

I didn't know that guitar which I was learning to play in my university courses and what was my goal to be a professional guitarist that I'd actually turned guitar into an idol and I was worshipping it and God made that known to me and it was time for me to lay it down so that I could do God's will in my life what is the sin that's ensnaring you that's keeping you from running the race well and notice he goes on to say we're running the race with endurance the race set before us and so what the author shows us the picture he gives us of living the Christian life with an enduring faith is a common race we're all in the race but each one of us is competing not so much against others as against our own selves and those things that would seek to hold us back and so we see first of all this enduring faith pictured as a common race notice a second element of the text this morning not only do we see enduring faith pictured we see enduring faith perfected look at verse 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 this resumes the theme we talked about a strategy of the author in this letter to trace out how Jesus is better and greater than everything else and here's the great news this morning one translation in verse 2 could be that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of faith in other words he already ran the race for the joy set before him he endured the cross now if you know anything about crucifixion in the ancient world you know it was a very shameful event criminals were crucified criminals were hung on a cross naked stripped of all of their clothing in the ancient world public nakedness particularly for the Jews was a terrible shame and they hung these criminals on crosses right along the main road so that when people walked by they would see the criminals hanging there naked shamed publicly for their crimes and they would get the message it was almost like a billboard from the Roman Empire don't mess with Rome or this is what happens to you now there's one thing about this when we think about Jesus because Jesus had not sinned the author of Hebrews tells us he was without sin he was tempted at all points like a man but without sin and yet did he not hang on one of these same crosses as a criminal naked and stripped of his clothing and shamed publicly notice how verse 2 addresses that the author and perfecter of faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross I've been told it's the most painful method of execution the Romans could come up with he endured it and he despised the shame but notice this he has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

God honored him even though the world shamed him God honored him for his obedience and gave him the position of power and priority at his own right hand what an amazing truth John's gospel indicates that Jesus made this claim it's an astounding claim I can't even fathom it Jesus said I always do what pleases the father can you imagine ever making that statement I always do what pleases the father and God rewarded him because for the joy set before him and by the way I would argue the joy set before him was doing his father's will and maybe even bringing many into the kingdom who would trust in his sacrifice for sin and so we see here enduring faith perfected and we could say it like this

[28 : 55] Jesus is the greater exemplar of faith he trumps everyone in the hall of faith in chapter 11 because he's not only the first one to complete the race fully he pioneered it in a sense he's the one who perfected what enduring faith looks like finally look at a third element of the text in verse three we see an enduring faith pictured an enduring faith perfected but finally enduring faith pondered notice verse three for consider him who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself so that you will not grow weary and lose heart consider him in the first service I mentioned this unfortunate truth about students in our day we often require students to attend what we used to call cultural events now we have another name for that but basically go to a concert go to a play go to something that will help them better understand what culture in the western world is like and when

I used to go and monitor these events I noticed the students would sit there and listen politely but as soon as the intermission came they'd pull out of their pocket a smartphone and they start doing this somebody told me the other day by the way that's called doom scrolling!

Doom scrolling just endlessly going through the social media pages right? The whole time of the intermission they're doom scrolling and then as soon as the performer comes back they put their phone away and they listen to the performance I contrast that with my own experience when I used to go to recitals as a music major back in my day in college we didn't have smartphones guess what I did during the intermission I pondered things I thought about ideas I processed what I had just seen in the performance I took some time to reflect now this bothers me a little bit because as I'm looking around when our young people and for that matter any people in our culture ever pondering anything we don't have time to ponder every single second of our day is taken up with some activity we never think that's a bit of a problem for a

Christian because the author of Hebrews tells his audience what consider him who is him consider him consider him who has endured such hostility by sinners against himself and why should we do that so we will not grow weary and lose heart Jesus has pioneered the way for us and if we'll just reflect on him and what he's done on our behalf we'll actually find the answer to the struggles that we face in the race that we're running so this morning I just want to encourage you with these ideas we are called as believers to an enduring faith but sometimes there are great challenges that we meet as we seek to walk with the Lord there are expectations that our culture puts on us there are pressures from those who would call themselves religious there are all kinds of currents that are at work in our lives to turn us away from following

Jesus but here's the good news Jesus himself has pioneered the way for us to have enduring faith and so I challenge you today I don't know what you're facing specifically I don't know what issues you have but the spirit of God does and now as we move to a time of invitation I invite you to reflect consider Jesus in light of your own struggles and sins and the weight that you carry in this race and see him heartening you building you up by his great example the greater example of the model of faith and I pray as you do that you'll allow the spirit of God to shape you into his image I invite you to pray with me father we thank you for an opportunity to consider these great truths today thank you for the author of

[34:04] Hebrews and the text that he penned lord thank you that it addresses the very concerns we have we're living in a time with a lot of cultural and religious pressure we're living in a time where there are so many alternatives to taking a moment and thinking and reflecting and pondering these truths and allowing your spirit to apply your word to our lives and hearts we're so busy that we're missing life so I pray for these my brothers and sisters today perhaps you're Christians here who would hear these words and say you know that's exactly right I need to make some changes my faith has been under attack I've been struggling and one of the reasons is because I haven't taken time to fix my eyes on Jesus the exemplar of enduring faith and to follow him lord perhaps another person today would say you know Dr.

Rankin when you talked about those encumbrances those weights those sins that were holding the runners back I knew immediately what was holding me back so I pray Lord right now give that person courage and strength to confess their sins to repent and turn back devoting their lives again to you and allowing your spirit to cleanse them and to conform them to the image of Jesus and perhaps there's one here today under the pressures and expectations of a fallen world who has been afraid to trust in Jesus and publicly announce him a savior and Lord God I pray for that person today that you would draw them to Christ that you would help them see there is no other name under heaven by which they must be saved there's no way to deal with sin aside from the one sacrifice

Jesus offered once for all and Lord I pray that you would draw them to yourself and Lord spiritually regenerate them that they may be born again Lord we give you this time of invitation and ask you to work unhindered by your spirit in our lives and hearts help us to live out the enduring faith the author of Hebrews encourages us to embrace for we pray it in Jesus name invite you to