

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

+Judi: A reading from Hebrews 11:1-12:2

+All: Listen for God's word.

+Judi: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

+Matt: That's pretty deep. That's right up there with, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

+Rachel: Sorry for the interruption, Judi and Judi. Matt interrupts me all of the time. But you're right, Matt.

+Matt: Did you hear that? I'm *right*.

+Rachel: This *is* deep. The faith that the writer of Hebrews is so assured about has everything to do with God: God's redemptive work, God's will, God's call for justice and peace, God's heart, God's promises. Our rootedness to these deep, invisible, holy foundations is the stuff of what we call "faith." We catch a glimpse of God's "new heaven and new earth" not with the eyes-in-our-head, but only with the eyes-of-our-heart. It's deep.

+Matt: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for . . . Go on.*

+Judi: Because Abel had faith, he offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. God was pleased with him and his gift, and even though Abel is now dead, his faith still speaks for him.

Enoch had faith and did not die. He pleased God, and God took him up to heaven. This is why his body was never found.

+Matt: I hardly know who Enoch is, but it's wonderful that he pleased God. *Rejoice in the LORD always*, Paul writes. The Psalmist says, *Let everything that breathes, praise the LORD!*

+Rachel: Shhh.

+Judi: But without faith no one can please God. We must believe that God is real and rewards everyone who searches for him.

Because Noah had faith, he was warned about something that had not yet happened. He obeyed and built a boat that saved him and his family. In this way the people of the world were judged, and Noah was given the blessings that come to everyone who pleases God.

Abraham had faith and obeyed God. He was told to go to the land that God had said would be his, and he left for a country he had never seen.

+Matt: Compared to Abraham, I have such a small faith. If God called me to go to Rantoul or Urbana, I might go. But go to a brand new place in a whole new land? That takes faith.

+Rachel: And that's the point, isn't it? God gives us what we need to do what God calls us to do, or to go where God calls us to go.

+Judi: Because Abraham had faith, he lived as a stranger in the promised land. He lived there in a tent, and so did Isaac and Jacob, who were later given the same promise. 10 Abraham did this, because he was waiting for the eternal city God had planned and built.

+Rachel: Abraham could discern God's promises and Abraham could trust God's promises.

+Matt: Compared to Abraham, my spiritual vision is so poor, my trust is so weak, and my faith is so anemic.

+Rachel: I've noticed.

+Judi: Even when Sarah was too old to have children, she had faith that God would do what God had promised, and she had a son. Her husband Abraham was almost dead, but he became the ancestor of many people. In fact, there are as many of them as there are stars in the sky or grains of sand along the seashore.

+Matt: This is how Eugene Peterson translates that: *By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. That's how it happened that from one man's dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions.* Are we allowed to talk about "loins" in church.

+Rachel: I love that God created a whole people from two of the least expected people.

+Matt: That's God's way, isn't? God often uses the least expected people, and equips them to do great things. People like you.

+Rachel: And people like you. It's just beautiful, isn't it? That God would use us? *Just marvelous.*

+Judi: Every one of those people died. But they still had faith, even though they had not received what they had been promised. They were glad just to see these things from far away, and they agreed that they were only strangers and foreigners on this earth. When people talk this way, it is clear they are looking for a place to call their own. If they had been talking about the land where they had once lived, they could have gone back at any time. But they were looking forward to a better home in heaven. This is why God wasn't ashamed for them to call him their God. He even built a city for them.

+Rachel: That's a beautiful thought. These examples of faithful people are seeking a homeland that transcends this earth. A heavenly homeland.

+Matt: While they might have had heaven in mind, they were faithful in the here and now; they didn't just sit around waiting passively for a slice of pie in the sky.

+Rachel: They made this place better, and they were invested in their work in this world, but they saw beyond this place.

+Matt: Speaking of heaven, I hope heaven looks a little like San Francisco: an even climate, great views of the ocean, and good food from around the world.

+Rachel: I hope heaven looks a little like Sanibel Island: soothing waves, warm water, long beaches, and motorcycles.

+Judi/Matt: Huh?

+Rachel: Nothing says “freedom” like sitting on the back of a motorcycle, wind in your hair, sun on your face.

+Matt: Who knew? (This section of the sermon is brought to you by Harley Davidson.)

+Rachel: I’ve never actually ridden a motorcycle, but God’s heaven must be just out of this world. (But I digress.) The point here, of course, is these faithful people didn’t get too tied up in a place. They lived faithfully in their place and time, yes, but they kept their sights on a higher place. They were invested in something more than local real estate; they understood that God had more in mind than just San Francisco, Sanibel, and Champaign. God had the whole world in mind, the whole cosmos. All time and space and matter.

Just marvelous. This passage has the tendency to carry one away.

+Judi: Abraham had been promised that Isaac, his only son, would continue his family. But when Abraham was tested, he had faith and was willing to sacrifice Isaac, 19 because he was sure that God could raise people to life. This was just like getting Isaac back from death.

+Matt: Compared to Abraham, I have so little faith.

+Judi: Isaac had faith, and he promised blessings to Jacob and Esau.

Later, when Jacob was about to die, he leaned on his walking stick and worshiped. Then because of his faith he blessed each of Joseph's sons.

And right before Joseph died, he had faith that God would lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. So he told them to take his bones with them.

Because Moses' parents had faith, they kept him hidden until he was three months old. They saw that he was a beautiful child, and they were not afraid to disobey the king's orders.

Then after Moses grew up, his faith made him refuse to be called the king's grandson. He chose to be mistreated with God's people instead of having the good time that sin could bring for a little while. Moses knew that the treasures of Egypt were not as wonderful as what he would receive from suffering for the Messiah, and he looked forward to his reward.

Because of his faith, Moses left Egypt. Moses had seen the invisible God and wasn't afraid of the king's anger.

His faith also made him celebrate Passover. He sprinkled the blood of animals on the doorposts, so that the first-born sons of the people of Israel would not be killed by the destroying angel.

+Matt: Compared to Moses, I have a very small faith.

+Judi: Because of their faith, the people walked through the Red Sea on dry land. But when the Egyptians tried to do it, they were drowned.

God's people had faith, and when they had walked around the city of Jericho for seven days, its walls fell down.

Rahab had been a prostitute, but she had faith and welcomed the spies. So she wasn't killed with the people who disobeyed.

And what more should I say?

+Matt: *"And what more should I say?"* If we keep going at this pace, we'll never get to the sermon. We'll miss lunch.

+Rachel: But a sermon is nothing without scripture. The writer of Hebrews has lots more to say. She's on a roll! *LISTEN.*

+Judi: And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon,

+Rachel: Barak,

+Matt: Samson,

+Judi: Jephthah,

+Matt: of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith...

+All: conquered kingdoms,
administered justice,
obtained promises,
shut the mouths of lions,
quenched the power of fire,
escaped the edge of the sword,

+Judi/Rachel: were made strong out of weakness,

+All: became mighty in war,
put foreign armies to flight.
Women received their dead by resurrection.

+Judi: Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

+Rachel: Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment.

+All: They were stoned to death;
they were sawn in two;
they were killed by the sword;
they went about in skins of sheep and goats,
destitute, persecuted, tormented—

+Judi: of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

All of them pleased God because of their faith! But still they died without being given what had been promised. This was because God had something better in store for us. And he did not want them to reach the goal of their faith without us.

+Rachel^[1]: Us. Do you hear that word? We are included in this roll call of saints. Us. We. Our.

+Matt: The writer of Hebrews is reminding us that the journey of faith continues. And we are part of it. You. Me. We. Us. Our journey. Together. We take the baton from the long-dead saints of the faith, and we are called to join the race.

+Rachel: I don't think of it as a race, but as a parade. A *glory parade*. We're all joining the march. We are walking, walking to Zion. *That's cool*.

+Matt: I think of it was a square dance. We make overhanded stars and bow to our corners, and promenade. We are in the dance of faith.

+Rachel: The writer of Hebrews calls it a race. Race, parade, square dance, or whatever. We do it together and we tread some of the steps our foremothers walked. And we are doing it together. We. Us. Our journey, together.

+Matt: It occurred to me to count: Some form of the word "faith" appears 24-times in this passage.

+Judi: I count 28

+JOE GRANT: I count 27.

+Matt: The word "faith" is used a lot.

+Rachel: This is anaphora at work.

+Matt: Who's she?

+Rachel: Anaphora is a rhetorical device in which a word or phrase is repeated for emphasis. The word "faith" is meant to make an impact, and not only the word, but the reality. These people had faith in God, and faith, Faith, FAITH had them. It was because of this faith they often did brave, self-emptying, thoughtful, memorable things.

+Judi: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

+Matt: The word "faith" is used over and over again, and eighteen people are mentioned in this passage. Eighteen examples of ordinary people who had a little faith (or a lot of faith) and who attempted, by faith, to live godly lives of faith.

+Judi: You used the word "faith" 4-times just now.

+Rachel: I counted 5-times, but after talking about this passage long enough, the word "faith" just rings and rings.

+Matt: Eighteen people are mentioned, not to mention the prophets.

+Rachel: There are three major prophets, and 14 minor prophets. Is there *really* such a thing as a minor prophet?

+Matt: A lot of people. This list is meant to encourage us. We are not only surrounded by these faithful examples of the faith, we are among the faithful.

+Rachel: Look at the faithful people who preceded us, who are with us, who inspire us. Who would be on your list of inspirations?

+Matt: That's a good question:

- Ghandi,
- Martin Luther King, Jr.
- David LaMotte
- My mom and dad
- Rev. Andrews
- Jeff Kellam.

That's a start. Who would be on your list?

+Rachel: That's a good question:

- My mom and dad
- Marguerite Burgen
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- Karl Jung
- Our sons

+Matt:

- The Burrows family
- Bill Gamble
- Ministers like George McKinley.

+Rachel:

- Leland Andrews
- Adrienne Davis
- Ministers like Heidi Weatherford are on my list.

+Matt: Name three people whose faith has been an inspiration for you. Out loud. On the count of three. (Are you ready? 1-2-3 NAME them!)

+Rachel: So, so many names. Such a great cloud of witnesses.

+Matt: So many saints, such a great collection of people on our lists, both living and dead, old and young, people who, though they are not perfect, they have set an example of faithfulness.

+Rachel: And not only those in our past, but those in our present, and those *yet to come!* Generations of people as numerous as the sands have yet, even, to be born. We don't know them, yet.

+Matt/Rachel: But God does!

+Matt: So great a cloud of witnesses have pointed (and will point) beyond their time, their family, their specific place to something greater, higher, transcendent.

+Rachel: Their lives point to the grace of God we see most clearly in the face of Jesus.

+Matt: Jesus. That name tops every list.

+Rachel: Yes, chapter eleven of Hebrews is a big lead-up to the name chanted above all names, Jesus. And Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith, our faith's founder. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He's the cornerstone and the giver of faith, in the first place.

+Matt: We may not always believe in God, but Jesus is God's proof, that God will always believe in us.

+Matt/Rachel: Thanks be to God.

+Rachel: Years from now, somebody may recall *YOUR* name, and they may say about *you*: “This person’s faithful love of me bore witness to the unfailing love of God.”

+Matt: Or, “This person’s ordinary faith pointed beyond itself to the extraordinary, out-of-this-world love of God.”

+Rachel: Years from now, people may talk about this church. They may say, “This church has been a family of faith for a long time, and has provided a holy space for worship. It’s been a thinking-place and practice-place where folk grow in faith, share faith, question faith, and are shaped by faith.”

+Matt: Do you think people will say that about this church?

+Rachel: I hope so. That’s what I say about this church.

+Matt *So great a cloud of witnesses.*

+Rachel: For all the saints we remember from yesterday, today, and tomorrow, we say

+Matt/Rachel: Thanks be to God . . .

+Matt: May God continue to kindle and nurture faith
in this church and her people,
in the manner of Jesus,
by the power of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.

^[1] Eugene Peterson puts it this way: *Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.*