

YOU HAVE NEED OF ENDURANCE

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

In this series we're going to study a portion of a letter by an unknown pastor, the New-Testament book of Hebrews. Like the exiles of Haggai's day, whose experience we considered in Paul Taylor's recent series (Discovery Papers 5235-5238), the recipients of Hebrews had begun well but were in danger of losing their faith. They are exhorted, warned, and encouraged by victories in the past, a vision of the future, and most of all by a portrait of Christ himself—grand, authoritative, and beautiful.

This letter can be daunting with its many references to Israel's history and religious practices. Yet one of the best-loved and most accessible chapters of the Bible is Hebrews 11, which is a great tour of Bible history. Hebrews 11 will be the text of this series. We'll go through it slowly and hear its great, encouraging accounts of the faithfulness of God and the faith of his people. In this message I'll set the context and suggest a picture—a runner in a race—that we will carry with us through the messages to follow. The title of this message, *You Have Need of Endurance*, is a phrase that occurs in Hebrews 10:36. The word "endurance," *hupomone* in Greek, is used again in the first verse of 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, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." The wonderful accounts of believers who have gone before us—Enoch, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, and many more—great stories of God at work in human lives like ours, are bracketed by a call to endure.

We should imagine a distance runner who has run a long way and has come to a point of struggling, wondering, "Do I have what it takes to finish this race?" And the runner in this case is in an arena. He's got sweat in his eyes, and he can't discern individuals very well, but he looks up in the stands and he sees what is called here "a great cloud of witnesses" cheering. In Roman times they would have been wearing white robes, and probably looked something like a cloud. The runner realizes that these are countless people who have run the race before him and finished, and now are enthusiastically crying out that he will as well: "Finish the race! Don't give up!" Let's hold on to that picture, that thought of beginning, continuing, and finally finishing the race, encouraged by all these men and women we're going to meet in the subsequent messages. Every time I read this part of Hebrews I'm put in mind of the Olympic marathon of 1972. The Olympics took place in Munich that year, and Frank Shorter won the marathon. He was the first American in nearly fifty years to do so. And he didn't just win it, he crushed the field. He was ahead by more than half a mile, running by himself way out in front of the rest in a heroic performance. The marathon had started out in the countryside and took the competitors through towns and villages. Almost twenty-six miles later they finally ran through a tunnel into the Olympic stadium, running around the track to complete the long race. And of course in the stands were thousands of people. It was announced that the race leader was approaching. But as the onlookers were waiting, an imposter jumped onto the track and ran out of the tunnel waving his arms. The crowd expressed its anger, and when Shorter ran into the stadium, everybody was booing. He expected to be greeted by cheering for this extraordinary race, the highlight of his life—and found himself being booed!

Our experience in Christ is the antithesis of that. We can't see the saints and angels who cheer for us except in miraculous circumstances. We grow used to silence, or perhaps negative reactions like the booing in the Munich stadium. But our text instructs us that there is a great cloud of witnesses cheering for us. They have finished and we are going to finish as well. God has been and is faithful, and he is going to complete what he has begun in us.

Now let's consider the last paragraph of chapter 10 by way of getting oriented to study chapter 11 in subsequent messages. I want to call attention to two statements. The first one is, "Do not throw away your confidence." That is, don't abandon something that is valuable. Don't quit, as if the faithfulness of God and the enterprise we're engaged in aren't worth it anymore. And then at the very end of this paragraph is the statement, "If he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him"—a warning against shrinking back in fear.

Hebrews 10:32-39:

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, 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.

**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.
But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.**

Researchers describe a phenomenon that takes place in distance running. The energy in glycogen is readily accessible, and the human body, especially that of a well-conditioned athlete, can store enough glycogen to run about twenty miles. When they run out and they realize they can't continue as before, when they've "hit a wall," there's a psychological factor that enters in.

The Christian life has that kind of trajectory in many cases. We start out depending on our own strength and capabilities, which are readily accessible, until a point comes when we realize we can no longer keep going that way. Our best efforts aren't good enough. We need another source of power besides what we have been drawing on. We come up against difficulties in life that we weren't ready for, and we require God to intervene, because our best has run out finally. I think that's something like the circumstance that these Hebrews were in. They had begun well, but they were in a place now where they needed God to intervene so that they would finish the race.

Let's look again at this text in two sections.

“The way is narrow that leads to life”

Verses 32-36: “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, 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.”

This is describing a race that begins not by staying on the course you were already on, but, to use Jesus’ imagery (Matthew 7:13-14), by leaving the broad, obvious road, the common one, the goals that everybody else has of making life better for themselves in every possible way, and veering off through a narrow gate onto a harder road. You make choices that are going to cost you something. You decide that righteousness is better than sinful pleasures, that being truthful is better than being applauded, that partnering with people who love God, who are in prison, who are set aside and disregarded, who are poor, is better than attaching yourself to the rich and famous and well-promoted in this world. The race begins at a fork where you decide to go a different way for Christ’s sake, with his purposes as your goal, with his direction as your path. And the Hebrews joyfully began the race.

We recently had a visit from some Pakistani friends. We got to hear about the choices they made to walk alongside poor and persecuted Christians in their country, to take supplies into Muslim areas hit by the Kashmir earthquake, where they weren’t welcome to come because they were Christians, and yet they did so anyway, bringing supplies and help to those who would otherwise reject them. Our friends have the option of choosing safer surroundings, but they want most to be where God has called them to be.

Elizabeth Thrasher grew up in this church. She’s now working with students at Chico State University, and this summer the project is to help students who are new to the faith get launched in their Christian life. So they are spending the summer in the Tenderloin in San Francisco, ministering to poor people on the streets.

When the MVP of the Super Bowl, his team having won, comes running off the field, he is asked, “What are you going to do now?” He says, “I’m going to Disneyland!” The idea is that after you win, you reward yourself.

Well, these young Christians have answered God’s call to follow Jesus: what are they going to do now? “We’re going to go live in the Tenderloin in a seedy hotel and care about poor people.” How do you get launched in the Christian life? You don’t start out looking for what you can get. You look for someplace to identify with the love of God in a broken world. The letter to the Hebrews was written to people who did so joyfully.

So it’s good to ask: Are we running the right race? Have we started in the right direction? Have we chosen the narrow track rather than the broad one?

Verse 35 says, “Do not throw away your confidence.” After the glycogen is all burned up, after we’ve run a long way and we realize that the whole thing is harder than we hoped it would be, what do we do then? How can we forgive this difficult person not seven times, but seventy-times-seven times? How can we continue in circumstances in which there is no prospect of change, in which we’ve prayed and prayed, and although God apparently hears our prayers, we don’t sense that he’s answering them? How do we keep going instead of throwing away our confidence, giving up?

Consider the statement in Galatians 6:9: “Let us not lose heart in doing good....” We have done a good thing and another good thing and another good thing, and now we’re worn out doing good. We seem to be running in place. Will anything ever change?

Yet as we’re running this race, there are countless believers who have gone on before, and they are calling from the stands, “Keep going! It’s worth it! God will get you through this! He is accomplishing his purposes—he will not forget you. Don’t throw away your confidence! Don’t quit!” And as we continue, his resources become more evident to us, and we realize that there’s a different way to live that is more dependent on him and less dependent on us. And we don’t throw away our faith.

Not shrinking back

Let’s look at verses 37-39.

“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.
But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have
faith to the preserving of the soul.”

The problem here is shrinking back from something we’re afraid of. Another element of the race, the Christian life, is the realization that we are required to follow this track through a very narrow place where there is a dark cave with a dragon in it. There is a frightening reality in our life that God wants to deal with. It might be abuse in the past that darkens current relationships. It might be a well-hidden addiction that we don’t want anyone to know about.

Verse 39 is very important: “We are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.” We are going to make it. That’s what this text calls on us to believe. And we will be encouraged to make it because in every difficult thing we face, somebody has gone before us and faced it, trusted God and gotten through it. They are cheering for us, and their testimony will strengthen us for our race.

San Francisco hosts the Bay to Breakers run in May each year. But the Bay to Breakers is not a real race. It’s a costume party, a game, a show. The Olympics are more serious, but they too eventually fade in importance. Christian discipleship is pictured in Hebrews as a long and

demanding race of eternal significance. The prize awarded is Jesus voice saying, “Well done!” to the finishers. It is worth everything that it will cost in the interim. The race is worth finishing!

Ron Hasegawa is one of the brothers in the stands cheering on those who are still running. Frank Shorter is six foot three, smart, gifted in every way, applauded, and accomplished. Ron Hasegawa never made it to five feet tall. He got a kidney disease when he was three years old and lived his entire life on dialysis. Toward the end he would have to go to El Camino Hospital in Mountain View many times a week. He came to faith when he was a teenager and served Christ quietly over the years. At the end of his life he couldn't get to church much at all, his health failed so badly. Ron took steroids that made his face puffed up. He was the last person you'd think of as an athlete if you saw him. He walked slowly, a tiny man. But he is, as much as Moses and David, Abraham and Sarah, a hero of the faith who has finished the race. He died not long ago and we had a service for him here. Some of the people who spoke at his service were the men and women from the dialysis unit at El Camino Hospital. One patient in particular, a single mom who was scared to death of her future when her kidneys failed, suffering pain and uncertainty, said that the one who got her through it was Ron Hasegawa. “He prayed for me, talked to me, believed in me. He helped me understand what I was facing. He knew what was going on and he helped me get through it.” Ron's life touched and inspired others. He's cheering now to inspire us, because his race is finished, and he's heard the Lord say, “Well done!”

We're going to begin reading stories like this in the remainder of the series, stories of well-known Bible figures. They rejected temptations to quit, to shrink back. Ron was fifty-five years old when he died, fifty-two of which were burdened with a difficult disease. Was it worth it to keep running? Yes. It's stories like these in the Scriptures and stories of people we know ourselves that I hope will help us understand our experiences. We'll hear their cheers and we'll trust our Lord, and then someday we'll be the ones who will turn and encourage the people coming behind us.

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First Message
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[Back to Index page](#)

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