

Keep Running the Race, Looking to Jesus

Introduction:

In bowling clubs, RSL clubs and even some churches there are “Honour Rolls” listing the names of those from those clubs, churches or communities who gave their lives or fought for their country in times of war. What a great sacrifice they made, for us.

LOOKING BACK TO EXAMPLES OF FAITH

Hebrews Chapter 11 is sometimes called “the honour roll of faith”. The writer begins: *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.*

Then we find listed men and women who had faith in our sovereign God in Old Testament times, beginning with Abel through to *Samuel and the prophets.*

Some of them suffered horrific treatment for trusting God. As the writer says: *Others were tortured...some faced jeers and flogging while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two, they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated - the world was not worthy of them.*

The writer goes on: *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.* It turns out that only with us who would come so long after would they receive their salvation, in the same way that we do, through the precious blood of Christ.

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These great examples of faith from the past are described as *a great cloud of witnesses* in Hebrews 12:1. It is as though they are urging us on in the faith. We know how a crowd of supporters can spur on swimmers and other athletes in the Olympics or a local school carnival. *Come on Johnny! Give us your best Sarah!* That's what we should all be doing in the local church, encouraging one another, spurring one another on in the faith of Christ. It's one of the reasons we gather as the church!

RUNNING THE RACE

On the basis of this great cloud of witnesses, the writer exhorts his readers to do two things:

Firstly, *let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles*. Every Christian carries baggage from the past. We all have obstacles to overcome to follow Jesus. We need to get rid of those things. It is a decision of the will and it requires determination. It requires the help of God and the support of others. Sin often gets in the way of Christian growth. Swimming in the ocean, we may encounter sea weed which hampers our swimming stroke. We can become entangled in it. So it is with sin. It so easily entangles. We need to be free of it.

Secondly, the writer says, *let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us*. In any race we need to persevere to reach the finishing line. There's no point starting a race and dropping out. At a sports day, at the Olympics, at the Bathurst 1000, in any sporting event, there's a race marked out for the competitors. They need to stick to the track. They need to persevere. So it is in the Christian life. We need to persevere.

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As the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* Like Paul, we need to persevere as a Christian to the end of our lives.

LOOKING TO JESUS AS AN EXAMPLE AND FOR HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Most top athletes have a coach, in individual and team sports. Sometimes the coach is one of the players. He or she is a “player-coach”. Jesus is our player-coach: training, correcting and encouraging us.

So the writer to the Hebrews says: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.* He had no sin to hold him back in obeying his Heavenly Father but he sure suffered: He endured the cross. The physical pain experienced on the cross was enormous. But far worse was the pain of the sinless Son of God carrying our sin upon himself. He was counted as a sinner so that our sins could be forgiven. He scorned the shame of the cross. *He endured such opposition from sinful men.* Even the religious leaders of his day plotted to kill him.

We can look back to the men and women of faith in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. We can look around us to those Christians whom we know and admire. We can be spurred on by them all. But the only one who can ultimately help us is the Lord Jesus, through His Spirit. So we fix our eye on him, not turning to the right or left, not being discouraged by unpleasant things which may be said to us by non-believing family and friends, not being discouraged by illness, loss of job, wayward children or anything else which might entangle and distract us. Let's keep our focus on Jesus, whom God raised from the dead and had sit at his right hand, the place of honour.

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Conclusion:

The Christian life is like a race. The course is marked out for us. There are people on the side-line cheering us on. And there is Jesus to whom we look as an example of perseverance and for encouragement and help in finishing well.

May all of us here today persevere in faith this week and encourage others who have become Christians to do the same.