

Running the Race

Marked Out for Us

Lessons from Hebrews 12

Andrew Wooding Jones

Contents

Foreword	6
Introduction	7
1 Don't run alone	8
2 Look where you are going!	18
3 You can't run if you're tangled up.....	29
4 Keep on running.....	40
5 Run in the right direction.....	49
6 Look at Jesus as you run	58
7 We can only run because of Jesus.....	67
8 Keep on running when you make mistakes.....	76
9 Fit runners.....	85
Discussion material for groups	91



Introduction

In September 2000, I was invited by Mike Breen, the then Team Rector of St Thomas' Church in Sheffield, to preach to the whole church on my last Sunday before leaving South Yorkshire to become the Director of Ashburnham Place in East Sussex. I felt drawn to the early part of Hebrews 12 and preached from verses 1–3. Later that autumn, I returned to the same verses as I led my first day for the gathered community of permanent staff and volunteers at Ashburnham.

Since those two important events in 2000, Hebrews 12 has become a significant foundation in my personal life and in my work of leading a Christian organization and Christian community. Often I have returned to these verses both as a source of hope and as a reminder of all that I am called to. In the last few years they have formed a nine-week course which has been used with the staff team here once or twice each year. I have been humbled and encouraged by those who have told me how much the course has helped their walk with God.

As a team at Ashburnham Place, many of us have been challenged to keep on running the race marked out for us. It is my prayer that those who read this book will share that joy of fixing their eyes on Jesus as they run his race.

Personally, I am so grateful to all who have run with me in the last few years, particularly at St Thomas' Church in Sheffield and at Ashburnham Place. God has placed so many people in my life who have cheered me on—some just for a brief moment and others for many years. I want to thank them all for helping me to persevere even when the going has been tough.

Most of all, I want to thank Margaret, Tom and Katie for sharing the race with me. May we as a family keep our eyes on Jesus and follow him!

Don't run alone

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...

HEBREWS 12:1

Running with Old Testament 'heroes'

How many dramatic productions—from school nativity plays to West End theatre—have noticeably improved in the move from rehearsal to performance before an audience? How often have employers commented on how much better people work when their supervisor is around?

It is true that the presence of someone who encourages and affirms will often bring confidence to a person who may be struggling or uncomfortable. The boost that comes from being told, 'You are doing well' or 'That was a great piece of work' will be of immense value.

It is in these simple scenarios that we begin to catch the relevance and impetus of a 'cloud of witnesses'. We will find that they can be our audience cheering us on, our source of encouragement to ensure that we finish our task; they are there to help us when we feel discouraged or lacking affirmation.

Hebrews 12 begins with a 'Therefore', taking us back to what came before. In the previous chapter the writer has described the lives, and particularly the faith, of many Old Testament characters who were witnesses to God's faithfulness and were notable for their perseverance even in times of weakness. Although they lived so long ago, we will find that the ups and downs of their lives resonate with some of our own experiences.

Abel (Hebrews 11:4) is mentioned because of his offering to God. Rather than simply going through the motions, he gave to God from a heart of faith. Our lives are to be lived out as an offering of worship to God—not doing it for the sake of doing it but because, as Matt Redman reminds us in his song ‘When the music fades’, God invites us to ‘the heart of worship’, which is ‘all about... Jesus’ (Kingsway’s Thankyou Music, 1997). Our offering is not mechanical; it’s not about what we have done or achieved but about God and who he is.

In the lives of Abel and his brother, Cain (see Genesis 4), we see the contrast between faithful giving and self-centred giving. As Hebrews 11:4 reminds us, it is the righteous desire of Abel that affects his act of worship. He wants to be right before God—far more so than Cain, whose ambition is merely to be right before other people. As we seek to find the right people to encourage and support us, one criterion that flows from this verse is the question of whether someone is a God-pleaser or a people-pleaser. Who are they worshipping and who do they want to bless—God first, others first or themselves first? True righteousness seeks to live to worship God first.

Enoch (Hebrews 11:5–6; see Genesis 5:18–24) is commended as one who pleased God, and his desire to please God comes from a relationship of faith. Like Cain, we may find ourselves more concerned with what others see in our lives than with what God may hope to see. The pressures that cause us to please others may stem from fear (perhaps to do with how we expect to be treated, or with the possibility of failing in the eyes of others), from a desire for reward (either financial or emotional—because we value a ‘well done’ from other people more than God’s ‘well done’), from insecurity (often fuelled by previous events in our lives) or from selfish motives (expectations about what we might gain from the situation).

For Enoch, however, it is clear that pleasing God was an act of faith. His life declared, ‘I believe and I trust God’; it was therefore inevitable that he should want to please his Lord. Hebrews 11:6 describes the way in which Enoch pleased God: by believing and

seeking. This attitude of faith will challenge us at times when our belief is wobbly or when we find ourselves pursuing alternative goals rather than seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

Noah (Hebrews 11:7) built his ark in faith. He was called by God to do something that was illogical in human terms: building a boat where there was no water and filling it with animals of every kind. There are times when God invites us to do surprising and unexpected tasks. In Noah we see an example of someone who was faithful—obedient to God in holy fear, not driven by fear of those who might have given him a hard time. He was glad to do what God asked of him.

When Jesus invited Peter to leave the normality of his fishing boat and walk upon the water, he too was being called to the impossible or even ridiculous (Matthew 14:22–33). The Bible reminds us that God is the God of the impossible—in creation, in the birth of Jesus Christ, and in all his miracles. Even today, God continues to call people to the unexpected, to move them out of their comfort zones to walk on water.

Are we ready to obey God and say ‘yes’? As we do that, we may need to look to other witnesses to encourage our faith-led response.

The faith of Abraham (Hebrews 11:8–12) is used to illustrate a number of things. We see his willingness to submit to God concerning the promise of a son to be born to him, even though he was so old (see Genesis 15:4–6). We recognize his willingness to be just one piece in God’s jigsaw; indeed, in his lifetime he would never have glimpsed how significant his faith would be in God’s eternal plan. We see the extraordinary depth of his faith as he responds to God’s command to sacrifice his longed-for son, willingly pressing on to do as God has asked (Genesis 22:1–14).

There is a challenge for us in all these examples. Pride may cause us to want a more significant and prominent role in God’s plans and purposes than we might be asked to have. As we consider the role of these witnesses, we need to recognize their humility in being willing simply to do their bit amid a much bigger picture.

I believe that we need to pay particularly close attention to the witness of Abraham's life. There is always a temptation for us to put preconditions on God, rather than realizing that he sees the big picture and being obedient to his call as a result. We may overstate what we want rather than seeking to understand the potential and place that God knows is truly ours.

Living as we do in a culture where we are highly conditioned by the desire for 'results', we can learn many lessons from observing Abraham, someone who would only play a very small part, in human terms, in God's universal scheme. I live and work in a former stately home, which is now a Christian prayer and conference centre. In the past, vast amounts of money were spent to employ the most influential landscape gardeners to design the surrounding gardens and parkland. As they worked, two or three hundred years ago, they must have had little idea of the impact of their work on so many today who have come to appreciate their foresight and professionalism. Even though they never saw the full scope of what they achieved, future generations have been able to marvel at it. Do we have a vision with eternal perspective, rather than one that is limited merely to today or tomorrow?

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (Hebrews 11:20–22) all saw the importance of their lives as being in relation to the generations that would follow them. Isaac and Jacob showed that awareness in their exercise of faith as they blessed each next generation (Genesis 27:27–40; 47:29–31; 48:8–20). As we reflect on this, it can encourage us to pray for godly heritage in our own families and to look for the support and encouragement of those who model that heritage today.

Joseph went further, looking forward not only to the next generation's blessing but also to a physical return to the promised land. Although he died in Egypt, even as he faced death he had faith for the lives of those who would be his descendants. We see this in the instructions he gives about his bones, which were not to remain in Egypt but were to be returned to the land that had been promised to Abraham (Hebrews 11:22; Genesis 12:7; 50:25). Again we see

a strong sense in which Joseph recognizes his destiny in relation to history. He sees how his life is just a part of an ongoing story in which he will hand the baton over to others, who will seek to return to the promised land.

Moses' story, too (Hebrews 11:23–29), contains the same idea of being one piece in a much bigger story. Moses saw the promised land from Mount Nebo (Deuteronomy 34:1) but would die before he could lead the Israelites out of the wilderness and across the River Jordan to take possession of it.

As we look at the life of Moses, we see a number of poignant clues that reveal not only the faith of his family but also the way he exercised faith in his own life. We recognize the extraordinary courage and faith of his parents, first in hiding him and then in watching him being adopted into the very family that had threatened to kill him (Exodus 2:1–10). In Moses' faith, we see him identifying with his own people rather than with the rich lifestyle of the Egyptian palace. As we read about his killing of the Egyptian (Exodus 2:11) and then his confrontations with Pharaoh (5:1–12:32), the familiarity of the story can cause us to miss how extraordinary was Moses' choice to reject the values of his royal upbringing in order to stand up for what he believed to be just and right. Inevitably, this example challenges our own lifestyle and the choices that we make.

Furthermore, we can be comforted by Moses' perseverance as he does the things God asks of him even when he feels inadequate and when he is opposed by Pharaoh (5:1–21) and, later, by his own people (17:1–4). As we consider the witness of his life, it encourages us when we feel weak or fearful in our calling from God.

In leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, Moses had many more opportunities to exercise and demonstrate faith—for example, during the provision of manna and quail (16:1–36) and the defeat of the Amalekites (17:8–15). The writer of Hebrews (11:29) highlights the crossing of the Red Sea, when Moses led the people, confident in God's promises and faithfulness (Exodus 14:13–22).

After giving examples of specific leaders, Hebrews 11 moves on

to highlight the fall of Jericho (v. 30), the courage of Rahab (v. 31), who was both a prostitute and a part of Jesus' family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), and the lives of various judges, kings and prophets (vv. 32–38). Their characteristics are highlighted in graphic terms (there are, for example, allusions to David's victories as recorded in 2 Samuel 8:1–14 and Daniel in the den of lions in Daniel 6:22), and we see their commitment to God made evident in the most difficult of circumstances. They did not all receive reward or have their achievements recognized during their earthly lives, but they were all part of the preparation for the Messiah's coming.

Encouraged by Christian testimony

The qualities we see in these biblical people of God can encourage us to keep going and not to feel alone in our own walk of faith. Alongside this extraordinary group of individuals, however, there are others that God places around us to witness to his goodness and to encourage faith in him. Many Christians have found their lives and faith reinforced by the testimony of other believers. These believers may be historical figures; they may be well known or known only by a few, but their experiences and stories also make up part of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

It is well worth seeking out and reading Christian biographies as a way of hearing some of these testimonies. We needn't go looking for 'Christian superstars' whose experiences appear remote from our own, but if we can find stories of men and women like us, who walked in faith, we may learn from and be helped by both their successes and their mistakes.

Equally, we need those around us in our personal lives who will share their testimony. These people will be there for us, encouraging us in our faith and (as we shall explore in a later chapter) ensuring that our eyes stay on Jesus and that we run the race he has marked out for us. They will probably include our peers—those of a similar

age and Christian maturity—as well as those whose age and spiritual maturity might classify them as parents or even grandparents.

We should be ready, too, to share our testimony as an encouragement to those with whom we live, work and worship. In Revelation 12:11 we read about the power of testimony ('They overcame [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony'). I have been greatly encouraged and spurred on by stories of God's provision and healing and (most of all) stories of lives changed by the death of Jesus on the cross, shared among my friends and colleagues.

In Genesis 2:18, God remarks that it is not good for Adam to be alone. Alongside the biblical cloud of witnesses that God has given us, who continue to inspire and teach us so much, we all need living people around us who will serve as witnesses of faith—and we can be such witnesses for others. There are a number of reasons why this witness is so important.

We all need *support* as we live out our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. For young Christians, support will be essential, just as a young tree benefits from a supporting stake as it grows and develops. I am not suggesting we need to be that closely bound to each other, but it is certainly good to have people around and available when life gets difficult. For maturing Christians, there will still be times when support is needed: prayers, a timely word of encouragement, sometimes just a sense that the load is shared—all these can increase individual faith.

Offering support is a response that turns upside down the usual pattern in our society, which assumes that people should deal with their issues alone, however complex those issues may be. Christian faith is expressed in appropriate dependency on one another and not by living through struggles or facing trials by ourselves.

Alongside support comes the *encouragement* that will help many believers to keep going. Again, encouragement may flow from the sharing of a Bible verse, a word of congratulation, a smile or a message to show sympathy and identification with a difficulty or struggle.

Encouragement is important for everyone but especially for those who, for whatever reason, have low self-esteem or confidence.

In the opening verse of Hebrews 12, it is easy to misread the word 'cloud' as 'crowd'—and yet this can be appropriate, suggesting the idea of a crowd of witnesses who cheer us on. Just as sports teams are motivated in their endeavours by the roar of the crowd, many Christians will be motivated by the words and actions of those who 'cheer them on' in different ways.

Linked to encouragement is *affirmation*, which is also crucial in helping us to persevere in all that God calls us to. The 'you can do it' message is essential for those who are weary or discouraged. It is surprising how many people (even those who on the surface appear self-confident and assured) are built up by words of affirmation. Not only is it important for us to recognize our own needs in this respect, but we should also be ready to give affirming words (perhaps in a card or email) to those whose lives we touch. So many people feel unappreciated: are you ready to be a witness who turns the tide?

The word of encouragement may be expressed more strongly in *motivation*. The ability to help people not only to understand what God has called them to, but also to persevere in it, is essential. We can be inspired in this by our observation of biblical figures—later in the book we will 'consider [Jesus] who endured such opposition' (Hebrews 12:3)—but people around us in our everyday lives will be valuable, too. Almost all the characters we have met in Hebrews 11 faced enormous challenges, significant struggles and opposition. Like us, they had their tough times; like them, we can find a place of faith as we persevere.

Often, people find themselves wanting to give up, and a motivating word can lovingly encourage those who are struggling to keep on going. The role of the mentor or personal coach, in essence, is to motivate others (and we will look further at this later in the book). It is so easy to back away from someone's struggle when our role actually is to give the word that encourages them to persevere—sometimes through the pain barrier.

Sometimes motivation will be received (or given) through what I describe as ‘prompts and prods’. There will be times when we need the help of others to avoid ending up in difficulty as we follow Jesus. Those around us may, through positive prompts or convicting prods, help us to follow the way marked out for us and avoid deviation and temptation.

If we are the ones offering the prompts and prods, this does not give us permission to manipulate others; rather, we allow ourselves to be used by God to convict those in spiritual danger while still allowing them freedom to decide their response. We need to be careful that our convicting prods do not turn into words of condemnation and judgment. The role of the witness should always be supportive, not leaving the listener feeling cornered or lacking the freedom that God offers. At the same time, just as we should be careful not to condemn others, we should also be very careful not to ignore those who are struggling with temptation, thereby appearing to condone their actions. Good witnesses care enough to face difficult issues and not to bury them.

The second part of Hebrews 12:1 makes it clear that the cloud of witnesses will influence our lives in terms of hindrance, sin, guidance and perseverance. The witnesses will help us to recognize the realities of sin and hindrance in our lives by bringing conviction, and they will help us to see the way God is leading and encourage us to keep going even when the way seems hard. As we continue to run the race, we may need to recapture a sense of dependency on others so that we can be cheered on and encouraged. We need to be particularly aware of tendencies within us that would lead to a selfish form of independence. Many of us are reluctant to share much with others and tend to live very private and closed lives. We may need to move gently from that place to one in which the cloud of witnesses around us can be heard, whether they are ‘speaking’ from the Bible or Christian books or out of a personal relationship with us.

Who am I encouraging?

We need to remember, too, that we are also part of that cloud of witnesses. We need to be open to befriend our own generation of Christians and to provide parenting or mentoring for those who follow us. I am grateful that, in my own Christian life, I have those who parent me, peers who encourage me (as I do the same for them), and a generation following on that I have the privilege of leading and mentoring.

It is easy for us to make excuses for not obeying God or following his way. Many of the characters described in Hebrews 11 could have opted out of God's plans: Abel faced opposition and ultimately death, Noah could have stayed with the crowd, Abraham could have argued that he was too old, Moses was just scared, Joseph might have been fatally undermined by the attitude of his brothers, and Rahab could have felt unusable because she was a prostitute. When we feel inadequate, or when we want to find an easier way, we can remember the cloud of witnesses, there to encourage us.