

**The
Great Cloud of
Witnesses**



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Introduction

Athletes and singers love to be before a crowd. Who wants to run a race with no one watching or sing on a stage with no one listening? We all like to be cheered on as we perform. So it was in the 1st century when the games were on and the athletes engaged in the competitions of the day.

The book of Hebrews, from which our text comes, was written most probably around 63 or 64 AD, certainly before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. The date is important to the text because it has been over 30 years since Jesus ascended and the church was beginning to lose its energy. They thought that Jesus would return by now and He hasn't.

Paul, the assumed writer of the book, uses the race, an everyday occurrence, to encourage the believers to continue in their faith and not give up. Listen to what he says.

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience 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.” Hebrews 12:1-2

Hebrews 12:1 begins with the word, “Wherefore”. I always want to know what it’s therefore. In this case, it refers the reader back to chapter eleven and all that was said there. Let’s see what is said.

Hebrews 11:1-40

We, By Faith, Understand

11 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. ²For by it **the elders** obtained a *good* testimony. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things, which are seen, were not made of things, which are visible.

Faith at the Dawn of History

⁴By faith **Abel** offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.

⁵By faith **Enoch** was taken away so that he did not see death, “and was not found, because God had taken him”; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. ⁶***But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.***

⁷By faith **Noah**, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Faithful Abraham

⁸By faith **Abraham** obeyed when he was called to go out to the place, which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

⁹ By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with **Isaac** and **Jacob**, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰ for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.

¹¹ By faith **Sarah** herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand, which is by the seashore.

The Heavenly Hope

¹³ *These all died in faith*, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, *a heavenly country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

The Faith of the Patriarchs

¹⁷ By faith **Abraham**, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “*In Isaac your seed shall be called*,” ¹⁹ concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

²⁰ By faith **Isaac** blessed **Jacob** and **Esau** concerning things to come.

²¹ By faith **Jacob**, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff.

²² By faith **Joseph**, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

The Faith of Moses

²³ By faith **Moses**, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw *he was* a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command.

²⁴ By faith **Moses**, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, ²⁶ esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.

²⁷ By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them.

²⁹ By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry *land*, *whereas* the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned.

By Faith They Overcame

³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith the harlot **Rahab** did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

³² And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also *of* David and Samuel and the prophets: ³³ who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. ³⁵ Women received their dead raised to life again.

Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted and were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in* dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, ⁴⁰ God having provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us.”

These are the Heroes of Faith that believed God and held on for dear life. They saw into the future, with spiritual eyes, the fulfillment of the promise and believed, even though they died not actually seeing it fulfilled. These folks comprise the great cloud of witnesses spoken of in chapter twelve.

The Race of Faith

How important is the race?

1. Are we really in a race?
2. Who are we racing with?
3. Why do we have to race?
4. Where is the finish line?



I think these are logical questions that most folks would want to know, don't you? Paul is not saying that we are in a race with each other or that we are in a race with any person. He uses the race as a metaphor to encourage weary believers to continue in their faith.

If there are competitors in the race, it is not some sort of persecution, criticism, or antichrist attitude. It is Time and adversity for which patience will be necessary.

TIME: Have you noticed that time seems to pass quicker as we get older. Before you know it, years have gone by and we look back and some of us have nothing to see that is meaningful. We ran through the day after day with nothing to show for it. Money, fame, acquisition of stuff and all that just doesn't count. Jesus said to store up treasures in heaven where they will last and not be corrupted. **Matthew 6:20**

ADVERSITY: We, as Christians, face adversity all the time. We know that evil forces are continually against us, fighting to destroy us. However, in it all, we are more than conquerors. **Romans 8:31-39**

“What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? *It is* God who justifies. ³⁴ Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: “For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We are in this race of faith because we walk by faith and not by sight. **II Corinthians 5:7** The finish line is when we see Jesus. We will be like Him and free from all the tricks of the devil.

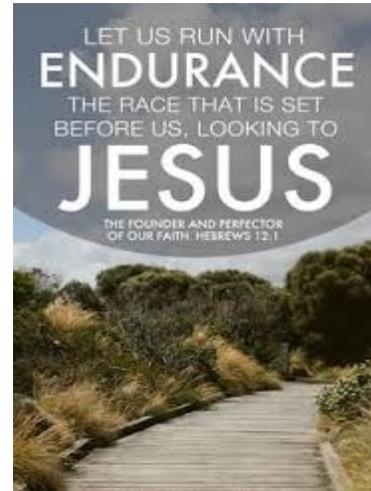
Paul is telling the believers that they are in a race against time and adversity. It has been set before them. If they were running in a race, so are we because the Word is applicable to every generation. They were instructed to run the race with patience. They were encouraged not to faint but to work through it all so they, like the Old Testament saints, could obtain a good report.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

So who are the “cloud of witnesses,” and how is it they “surround” us? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest of the Old Testament believers looked forward with faith to the coming of the Messiah. The author of Hebrews illustrates this eloquently in chapter 11 and then ends the chapter by telling us that the forefathers had faith to guide and direct them, but God had something better planned. Then he begins chapter 12 with a reference to these faithful men and women who paved the way for us. What the Old Testament believers looked forward to in faith—the Messiah—we look back

to, having seen the fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning His first coming.

We are surrounded by the saints of the past in a unique way. It's not that the faithful who have gone before us are spectators to the race we run. Rather, it is a figurative representation and means that we ought to act as if they were in sight and cheering us on to the same victory in the life of faith that they obtained.



We are to be inspired by the godly examples these saints set during their lives. These are those whose past lives of faith encourage others to live that way, too. That the cloud is referred to as “great” indicates that millions of believers have gone before us, each bearing witness to the life of faith we now live.

These past believers that ran the race, overcoming evil, adversity, and all the trials of life are indeed a testimony to the victory that is in Christ. When we get weary and tired from the strain of spiritual warfare, their lives and their walk of faith can encourage us. (Excerpts from Qut/questions.com)

Let Us Lay Aside Every Weight

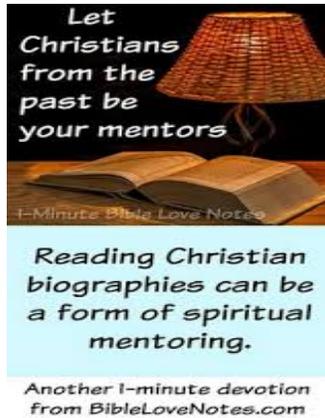
A weight is anything and everything that slows us down from our prescribed run. The expression “*every weight*” tells us that weights are manifold; there can be many, and they can be diverse.

A weight is not sin. There are many things we do as Christians that hinder our run even though those things in and of themselves are not wrong. The apostle Paul put it this way: “*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.*” (1 Corinthians 10:23)

There are no rules about how you must dress when participating in a race, but simply because it is lawful for you to wear what you will, that certainly does not advocate donning a heavy coat and cumbersome footwear! Such choices, while legal, do nothing but oppress the runner from running to win.

Each of us knows the things in our lives that are weighing us down from the race that God has called us to. Perhaps you are wearing the heavy coat of an unhealthy friendship, or the burdensome shoes of idle entertainment. Perhaps it is your overzealous work ethic, or your all-too-undisciplined bed habits. Such things drain our physical, mental and spiritual energy.

These things, while not sin, will keep us from fulfilling the will of God in our lives, and may even become gateways that lead us into sin.



Let us learn a lesson from the lives of past saints. For every man or woman who fought the good fight of faith, finishing the race with glory and honor, not one can be found who did not live a life of discipline and devotion to the God who had called them. The late John Bunyan, who himself exemplified this kind of a life, wrote, "Surely Abraham, David, Paul and the rest of the saints of God lost all to gain this glorious kingdom."

All these witnesses, who laid aside every weight to win that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, surround us. Let us too, with them, so run, that we may obtain! (Excerpts from Timothy Ministries)

The Sin That So Easily Besets Us

How do we overcome the sin which so easily besets us? Is there any way to be completely delivered from the sin that has plagued your life for years and years? The sin can be different for each person. You can rest assured that it is one or more of the deeds of the flesh that are listed in Galatians chapter five.

A person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ may be delivered immediately from sin's grip at the point of his or her salvation. But this experience is not shared by all believers. Most are not totally delivered from all besetting sins when they first trust in Jesus. Instead they find themselves still falling into sin.



There is no doubt that they have received eternal life, but their difficulty with sin remains. (Excerpts from SermonCentral.com)

The Road To Victory and Obtaining A Good Report

As Paul listed these heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, he began with Abel and then went on to talk about Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and so on. Then at the end of the chapter, Paul referred to all these heroes of faith, saying, "And **THESE ALL**...obtained a good report through faith..." (**Heb. 11:39**). This is the goal of every believer who walks in faith with God. He or She wants to obtain a good report when it's all over. If the great cloud of witnesses can win the race and obtain a good report, so can you and I.

The sins of the flesh keep the Christian in bondage if they indulge in them. If your sins binds you, then you are a slave to them and cannot serve God as you know you should. However, we are instructed to walk in the Spirit and we will not fulfill the lust (deeds) of the flesh. This is how we overcome. This is how we set the weight aside. We deny it access into our emotions and bring it into captivity to the obedience of our Lord. Our focus is on Jesus, knowing He knows how to deliver us from temptation.

Our Focus Is On God's Word



Paul says we are to set all these things aside, (Because they are not our primary focus in life) and to fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. It's a matter of perspective. If playing with sin and living for self is more important, then you will see that as a priority and live that lifestyle. However, if you are, "Born Again" and want to really know

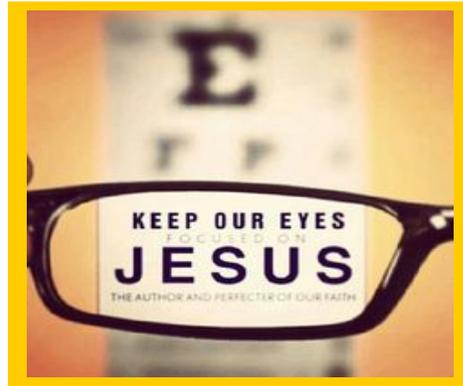
God and dwell with Him for all of eternity, you will make Him your priority and life's focus.

The heroes of faith kept their eyes on the promise of God. It was the very thing that motivated them and encouraged them to push through adversity. They did not give in to weariness, temptations or evil attacks. They walked by faith and in doing so, obtained a good report. Their testimony is our example by which we will also obtain a good report.

Conclusion

So, the bottom line is:

1. Stay in the Word.
2. Walk in the Spirit.
3. Trust In the Lord.
4. Be patient!
5. Endure suffering!
6. Keep the Faith.
7. Resist Satan and all evil.



All these witnesses, who laid aside every weight to win that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, are our example. We can sit back and dull out, saying it's just too hard or we can determine in our spirits that come hell or high water, we are following Jesus.

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” **Hebrews 11:6**

Our walk with God is in His Spirit. We must always trust that He is God and desires to reward us when we come to Him. Faith brings victory and obtains us a good report. Thus we become part of the “Heroes of Faith” for all eternity.

Let the Joy of the Lord be your strength. If you are weary, go to Jesus and He will lift you up. God bless you as you walk with Him.