

Remember the Witnesses

Hebrews 11:1-12:1a

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Note: Some of the ideas for this sermon come from *Mainstay Ministry* and are used by permission.

There are a lot of huge things happening in our culture right now. Apparently there's a big game tonight. Did you know that Super Bowl Sunday is the second-largest day of food consumption in the U.S. after Thanksgiving? 90 million chicken wings will be devoured (that's a lot of chickens running around without their wings) along with 8 million pounds of guacamole, which if spread over a football field would be 12 feet deep.

While I'm still moping because the Packers aren't playing I think it will be a good game. This past week I watched an interview with some of the Seattle coaches and players and was really pleased to hear Rocky Seto, who is the Defensive Passing Game Coordinator, put all the hype into perspective: *"Even if we win the Super Bowl, Jesus is still way better."* I'm glad our students will be watching it here and then hearing a gospel presentation during halftime.

Last Sunday night at the Grammy's (which I refuse to watch), apparently there was a display of overt immorality and a depiction of a satanic ritual on stage. At this point Grammy-nominated artist Natalie Grant and her husband got up and left. Natalie and her husband are Christ-followers and hopefully were already gone before Queen Latifah, along with Madonna, officiated at the "marriage" of 34 same-and-mixed-sex couples. After she left, this is what Natalie Grant said on her Facebook page: *"We left the Grammy's early. I've many thoughts about the show tonight, most of which are probably better left inside my head. But I'll say this: I've never been more honored to sing about Jesus and for Jesus. And I've never been more sure of the path I've chosen."*

There's another big cultural event coming up on Tuesday night, when Ken Ham, an evangelical creationist, will debate Bill Nye, the "Science Guy," an evolutionist. We've put information in the bulletin about how you can watch it at home. We encourage you to invite some of your neighbors and friends to join you.

Then, this Friday, the Winter Olympics open in Sochi, Russia! And with the games will come all sorts of gripping stories, from possible terrorism plots to new world records to new sports heroes.

As I reflected on all this, it struck me that while there are elements in our culture that appear harmless, there are others that are hurtful. I love how God has placed believers in key positions who are determined to be redemptive. As we approach the Olympics our neighbors and friends and co-workers will be talking about them. In an effort to equip us to utilize the Olympics as a bridge to gospel conversations, we're beginning a brand new series today called, "Go For the Gold: Becoming a Spiritual Champion."

With all that is happening around us, how do we keep heading north when our culture is heading south? How do we stay in the race when there are so many distractions? How do we connect

with our culture and yet not compromise? How do we not lose hope when everything seems so hopeless?

Did you know that the Bible likens the Christian life to a race? The Apostle Paul used a lot of sporting images. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, he tells us to ***“run in such a way to win the prize.”*** In Galatians 5:7, he says, ***“You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”*** And in 2 Timothy 4:7, he reflects on his life and writes, ***“I have finished the race.”***

Please turn in your Bibles to Hebrews 12:1-2 and let’s read it together: ***“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”***

We’re going to set up training camp in Hebrews 12 this month so that we can learn how to become spiritual champions. I’m thankful to Mainstay Ministry for the idea for this series. Our focus today is on “Remembering the Witnesses.” Here’s where we’re headed for the next three weeks as we train together:

- ❑ **Remove Any Hindrances** (Hebrews 12:1b)
- ❑ **Run With Perseverance** (Hebrews 12:1c)
- ❑ **Reach for the Goal** (Hebrews 12:2-4)

Let’s set the context of the Book of Hebrews. The author is writing to people who felt like giving up. These believers, for the most part, had lost hope and were falling away. The church was getting older and believers were starting to drift because they had become spiritually lazy and negligent. The culture around them was causing them to compromise. These Christians were coasting but didn’t know how dangerous their condition was. We see this in Hebrews 2:1: ***“Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.”***

As John Piper says, they were *“meandering in the crowd of life instead of running the marathon.”* These believers, perhaps like some of us, had lost their spiritual edge. They no longer believed that how they lived was all that important. Sure, they were going through the motions, but their hearts were becoming hard. Hebrews 3:12: ***“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.”*** And as Hebrews 12:12 states, they were weak and wearing out: ***“Therefore, strengthen the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees.”*** Do you feel feeble today?

It’s into this situation that the church is implored to remember the witnesses. As we come to the first part of Hebrews 12:1, imagine that you hear a trumpet call, or a starting gun, to get back in the race.

Let’s look at this verse phrase-by-phrase.

“Therefore...” Whenever you see the word “therefore” in Scripture, you should always ask what it’s there for. In this case, it serves as an emphatic bridge strongly affirming what was just written. It could be translated as “consequently.”

There’s an unfortunate and artificial chapter division here because these verses are really the climax and application to what we read in chapter 11. The names of the 16 individuals listed in Hebrews 11 are posted up on the walls of the auditorium. Listen as I read these stories from those who have been enshrined in God’s Hall of Faith:

⁴ By 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.

⁵ By 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.

⁷ By 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.

⁸ By 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.

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.

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.

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...”

“...we also...” I like how the writer (we’re not sure who it is) connects each of us with these individuals and includes himself with his readers by the use of “we.” That reminds me of what

we learned last week from the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray: “*Our Father... Give us...forgive us...lead us...*”

“...*since we are surrounded...*” The word “surrounded” means to be “*encircled tightly*” and infers that there are people “*lying all around us.*”

“...*by so great a cloud...*” The word great means “*vast*” or “*so much*” and indicates a quantity that is almost too numerous to count. There are so many people surrounding us that it looks like a cloud. Interestingly, the author chooses a word that describes a “*vast, encompassing and overhanging mass of cloud covering the entire visible space of the heavens.*” Notice also that the people that are referred to are not called “great,” but rather that the cloud is great. Every one of these individuals listed in chapter 11 had their flaws...but they were faithful.

“...*of witnesses...*” The image of a great cloud of witnesses is not one of spectators but rather of those who are “testifiers of the truth” as exhibited in the hall of faith in chapter 11. The word “witness” is literally translated as “*martyr.*”

The writer is drawing on the image of the Olympic Games, with the stands filled with those who have fought the good fight and have run the race. This crowd that looks like a cloud is literally encircling us.

They Still Speak

One of the most fascinating phrases in Hebrews 11 is found in verse 4 in reference to Abel: “...*he being dead still speaks.*” I don’t believe that people who have died speak to us literally, but I do believe that the message of their lives speaks loudly even after they’ve left this earth.

There are at least two benefits in remembering the witnesses.

1. They give us encouragement. When we focus on the faithful who have gone before us, we will be motivated to run the race with discipline and determination. It’s like “home-field” advantage when the stands are filled with friendly fans. CBS News reported last week that there were still 300,000 tickets available for the Sochi Olympics. I wonder if the lack of fans will affect the performance of the athletes?

In a similar way, the faithful who have gone before us have finished their part of the race and their lives of faith should encourage us to run hard.

2. They give us examples to follow. When we remember, we’ll be encouraged and as we study their lives closely, we can emulate their example. If they finished, then so can you! Let’s not forget the faithful who came before us. The Olympic athletes in Sochi certainly have studied previous champions in the hopes of emulating their example.

Speed skaters draw inspiration from Dan Jansen, who at the 1988 Olympics fell in his first two events after his sister’s death had left him shaken. Four years later he finished fourth and 26th. In 1994 he slipped and took 8th in the 500 but then took gold in the 1,000. People still remember

him skating a victory lap with his daughter Jane, named after his late sister, to whom he dedicated his medal.

And, the current U.S. Hockey team has no doubt watched “The Miracle on Ice” from Lake Placid in 1980, arguably the greatest moment in U.S. sports history, when a team made up mostly of college players upset a Soviet powerhouse who had defeated them 10-3 a week earlier in an exhibition. The next day, the U.S. rallied to beat Finland for the gold.

Olympic coaches encourage their athletes to study these men and women in order to motivate them to become like them. Likewise we are to replicate the faith of those who have come before us. Hebrews 6:11-12 makes this very clear: **“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”** I like this paraphrase: *“Don’t drag your feet. Be like those who stay the course with committed faith and then get everything promised to them.”*

What does their example teach us?

- **They believed and they behaved by faith.** They knew that in order to please God that they needed to exhibit faith. Notice Hebrews 11:6: **“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.”** I counted over 20 instances of the phrase **“by faith”** in this one chapter alone.

The Christian life is a life of faith. If you’re not living by faith right now, perhaps you’ve become too comfortable with your Christianity.

I like how Pastor Jeff taught this passage to the students several weeks ago. After explaining the Scripture he then turned to each student and said, *“...By faith Justin...By faith Katie...By faith Sam...By faith Megan...By faith Wade...By faith Ali...”* He then asked them how they are living by faith.

About 30 people are taking the Financial Peace University course on Wednesday nights. Beth and I are getting a lot out of it. I encourage you to sign up when we offer it again in the fall. Dave Ramsey makes the point that finding financial peace is 20% head knowledge and 80% behavior. The key is to put into practice what we already know. The same is true with our Christian lives. If we just fill up our brains with spiritual information without living by faith, we won’t experience transformation. Biblical faith involves believing *and* behaving.

- **They did what they could with what they had.** At first glance you might think that these individuals were “super saints” with no problems or baggage. Think again. Look at some of the names up on the walls.
 - ✓ **Rahab** was a prostitute.
 - ✓ **Gideon** was filled with fear, insecurity, and even doubt.
 - ✓ **Barak** couldn’t find the battlefield without Deborah and waffled frequently.

- ✓ **Samson** was high on pride and low on self-control when his fatal flaw led to his downfall.
- ✓ **Jephthah** came from a bad background, made a huge mistake, and ended up taking the life of his own daughter to keep a vow he never should have made.
- ✓ **David** committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Uriah.

As we look closely, we can find flaws, see some sin, and wonder why they are even called witnesses. Listen carefully. Some had great success and others stumbled. The reason they are listed here as examples to us is because they are *not* perfect, and neither are we. The key is that they believed and behaved with faith at some point in their life, doing what they could with what they had.

You are *not* a failure for the rest of your life because of what you've done in your past, or even how you've been living in the present. Your sins do not disqualify you. It's how you finish that counts.

During our Tuesday team times as a staff, we just started going through a book called, "Dangerous Calling" by Paul Tripp. I love the last sentence of the first chapter: "*You don't have to be afraid of what is in your heart, and you don't have to fear being known, because there is nothing in you that could ever be exposed that hasn't already been covered by the precious blood of your Savior King, Jesus.*"

In the 2004 Athens Olympics Paul Hamm messed up big time on his vault and actually fell into the judges' table. Everyone thought it was over for him as he went from first place to twelfth, but he didn't let his failure become fatal. He stayed in the game, kept his eyes on the prize and made an amazing comeback to gain the gold medal as the all-around men's gymnastics champion. By the way, he's from Wisconsin!

- **Their faith led them through fire.** We sometimes think that living by faith should make our lives easier. Actually, they often get more difficult. Listen to what some of them experienced: "*Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.*" (Hebrews 11:35-38). When you go through tough times, remember that you are not alone. Others have experienced far worse, and as we look at their lives, we can see that the same God, who saw them through, is with us today.

Here are several responses that will help us put this passage into practice.

1. What is God asking you to believe by faith? Are you faced with something right now that is stretching you, or even wiping you out? Decide to take God at His Word and believe what He has promised. Maybe God is asking you to go beyond belief and to take a step in changing your behavior. What is He asking you to do with what you know to be true? Is there something you've been afraid of? It's time to step out in faith.

I like how Ray Pritchard defines faith. He says faith is belief, plus unbelief and then acting on the belief part. Faith is more than just believing; it must affect our behavior. And when we do believe, doubts often come, don't they? Biblical faith acknowledges the doubts but then decides to act anyway.

2. Work on being a witness to others. One lesson from Hebrews 11 is that people from the past still testify today by the way they lived their lives. The other learning is that you and I are called to be testifiers of truth today. We do that by the way we live and by what we say.

The American Bible Society came out with a report last week entitled, "The Most [and Least] Bible-minded cities in America." Chattanooga, Tennessee came in at number one. Interestingly, San Jose came in at #97. This is the city where the LifeCity church planting team, sent out by Edgewood, is seeking to launch a church. When I posted this on Pastor John's wall, he wrote: "*Fourth from the bottom...for now.*" The QCA is ranked right in the middle at #44. As we live on mission for Christ let's determine to get the QCA to jump a few spots by next year!

People are watching you. What kind of witness are you? When they look at you, what do they see? What do they remember?

Here's an idea. As our country moves from the Super Bowl to the Olympics, use this series as a bridge to your neighbor or co-worker or family member. Invite them to join you for one of our weekend services. Look for Olympic moments that can be a springboard to sharing your faith. What is the Gospel according to you? As someone has said, "*You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day, by deeds that you do, by words that you say. Men read what you write, whether faithless or true. Say, what is the gospel according to you?*"

3. Pick a witness for encouragement and as an example. Read through Hebrews 11 and ask God to lead you to a biblical character to study and then read all you can about that individual. Maybe it's Sarah or Gideon, Rahab or Noah. Look up their name in a concordance and study each reference.

Are you struggling with perseverance? Get to know Noah, who spent 120 years building an ark. Dealing with discouragement? Observe Abraham, who wondered if God would come through for him. Are you in a crisis situation? Journey with Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers. Feeling alone and forgotten? Remember how God took care of Ruth. Is your past embarrassing? Be like Rahab and act in faith.

You might also want to pick an individual who is a modern-day witness. Pastor Saaed is an American citizen imprisoned in Iran for practicing his faith. Pray for his release. He's been in jail for over a year now. The world is not worthy of people like him.

A few years ago, at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with determination to finish the race. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the asphalt, hit the ground, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry.

When the other eight heard him crying, they all turned around and went back together. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "*This will make it better.*" Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes.

Jesus came to earth to pick us up because we've all fallen short of the glory of God. He is the ultimate champion and because He won, we win. When we put our faith in Him for forgiveness of sins He takes us to the finish line of faith...together.

Next week we'll look at how we can remove hindrances so that we can run the race with perseverance and reach the goal of becoming more like Christ.

Invitation Song: "'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus"