

## Sermon Notes, January 10, 2016

### Have You Felt Like Giving Up? Hebrews 11:32-12:3

Have you felt like giving up lately? Are you a bit frazzled or frayed around the edges? Maybe some of you have been doing battle with situations and difficulties that you face and you are worn out.

Maybe for some it's the stress of financial pressures. The only motivation for being there at all is that you're just trying to stay afloat—to keep up with the bills.

Maybe for you some of the hope is gone—and you're frustrated, you're disappointed—you feel a sense of malaise—a lack of focus.

At our Annual Meeting we're going to share the struggle for churches like ours to stay faithful in a denomination that keeps drifting away from all that seems biblical, and maybe you find yourself frustrated again

Have you felt like giving up lately?

As a preface to my remarks this morning, I have had moments that I have felt like that over these past few months with my health issues and some of the stuff that has gone on at church—some of the gossip and divisiveness that seems to be an undercurrent.

Maybe you've had these experiences where you see some ad about travel on the TV and your mind wanders there and you think—"that's where I want to be." It's always some other place than where we are right now. And we think to ourselves, "You know, I just want to hang it up. It would be so nice to get away for awhile—for a long while. Just live beside the pool. Whatever. I just want to get off the treadmill."

Now, let me say just this parenthetically, since every time I preach there are different things people hear—that I never say, as a matter of fact. But I need to say this, this morning, so that you're clear—there have been times where I have felt like giving up. There have been times when in the midst of depression, I felt like hope would never return. There have been the painful, difficult times in ministry when I felt like giving up on ministry and the church altogether. I have been there.

So let me ask the question this way—a little bit more specifically. Have you felt like giving up on God lately?

Have you begun to question the very love of God based on the circumstances in which you're living? Do you sometimes feel trapped by the very convictions and values that you hold? Have you found that trusting God and loving God hasn't solved all of your problems? Have you discovered that life in Christ hasn't always made life easy? In fact, it is often quite the opposite. And so, some of you have been faithful and yet, you're still financially strapped. Or you have been faithful and yet, you are still in ill health.

Have you felt like giving up on God lately?

Again, let me say that it's not the purpose of the sermon today to make you feel worse about yourself or your situation. But let's face it. If you feel that way even in some small way like giving up lately I have some words of encouragement for you. I hope. Words I want you to hear. Words that are true. Words that have been put to the test. Words that have been proved true by millions and millions who have come before you. Words to battle-weary saints. Reminders about the reasons for our hope. The author to the Hebrews reminds us, that we must remember we are not forgotten and we are not alone. *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses."*

Now, there are two messages there. Both of them important. The *"therefore"* which begins the twelfth chapter refers back to what the author has written in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter with his long list of heroes of the faith. If you look at the list you're going to see a bunch of people who were people who you might think always had their act together. But in this hall of heroes I'm sure that there were times when they felt like giving up.

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, David, Samson... And some who are not even named—the ones who follow in vv. 33ff. Do you suppose they ever felt like giving up? I think Elijah did. Says so right in Scripture. Do you think they felt alone? Do you think they ever felt like God had forgotten them? Have you felt like giving up lately? You're not alone.

But neither are you forgotten. Here we have to discern the main point of the text.

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."*

This command does not come out of the blue. This is the point of the whole book.

Endure, persevere, run, fight, be alert, be strengthened, don't drift, don't neglect, don't be sluggish, don't take your eternal security for granted. Fight the fight of faith on the basis of Christ's spectacular life & death & resurrection. Show your faith the way the saints of Hebrews 11 did—not by coasting through life, but by counting reproach for Christ greater than the riches of Egypt (11:26). So the main point of this text is one imperative—RUN! Everything else supports this—explains it or gives motivation for it. Run the race set before you!

First, let's look back to what precedes this command to run. *"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses."*

The first motivation is to see this great cloud of witnesses.

Who are they and what does their witnessing mean? They are the saints that have lived and died so valiantly by faith who have been listed in chapter 11. Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and all of those who suffered and died, *"of whom the world was not worthy."*

But the question to ask is what does their witnessing refer to?

- Does it refer to watching us from heaven?

- Or does it refer to their witnessing to us by their lives?

The word “witness” can have either meaning—the act of seeing something, or the act of telling something. *Which is it here?* It is the act of telling. The verb form of this word “witness” is used 5 times in Hebrews 11 and always refers to the giving of a confirming testimony rather than the mere watching of an event.

So I take the witnesses of Hebrews 12:1 to be the saints who have run the race before us, and as they finish the race, they circle around and press into the crowd along the route where we are running. And as we run there is a big, dense crowd pressing in upon the marathon route and they are there to say, through the testimony of their lives, *“By faith I finished the race. You can too!”*

The best way to illustrate this is with Hebrews 11:4, where the writer speaks of Abel and says, *“By faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.”* So Abel is in this great cloud of witnesses, and his is witnessing to us by his life through the Scriptures. We see examples of faith and perseverance under every imaginable circumstance:

David, Jonah, John the Baptist, John Mark, William Carey, Jonathan Edwards, Job, Stephen, and the countless believers today undergoing tremendous persecution for naming the name of Christ.

We saw that this verb form of “witness” is used 5 times in Hebrews 11. The word we get from that word is the English word “martyr.” They are the ones who understand fully what you are going through. They are the ones who have paid the price and stood firm and it is they who gather, as it were, around the sidelines of our race and they hold out their wounds and they hold out their joys and give us the best high-five’s we ever got and they are shouting and encouraging you with this:

*“This is true. God is faithful! Go for it! You can do it. By faith you can finish. You can lay the weights down. You can lay the sins down. By faith, and the assurance of better things hoped for, you can do it. I did it. I’ve been where you are! I know it isn’t always easy. I know that. But I know it can be done! So run! RUN!”*

They didn’t learn this in an academic setting. They learned faith and perseverance in the crucible of life. And it’s common ground. And they survived. In fact, they were victorious. It didn’t always look that way from the human perspective. But from God’s, they were victorious.

What he’s really saying is we not forgotten and not alone, and if you look at those who went on before, they didn’t even have what we have—last part of v. 39, *“Yet, none of them received what had been promised.”* They didn’t have Jesus. They didn’t have the indwelling Holy Spirit empowering them and working in their lives. And yet, they were able! You can do it. You are not alone.

Let me tell you some of the lies of the enemy which he uses to discourage and defeat.

- One of the first methods and lies he uses is to isolate you and to whisper that “no one cares.”
  - The second is to say to you “that no one understands what you’re going through. You are the only one. No one knows what you’re going through.”
  - Another is to say “You did something to deserve this, you sinned, and because of that you got to face this alone.”
- So we need to ponder what it is that we need to do to renew our focus. That means fixing our eyes on Jesus. That’s what he says here. It sounds simple enough. But it’s easier said than done. It means that we need to look intentionally into the face of Jesus and remove the distractions that are all around. That is intentional. Purposeful.

There is another motivation that comes to us in v. 39. It is that history is waiting for you to finish your race. Vs. 40 tells us, *“Because God has planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”* In other words, God’s plan for is that His people—all the redeemed—be gathered in before any of them enjoys the fullness of His promise. His purpose is that we all come into the fullness of our inheritance together.

So the motivation is this: As you fix your eyes upon Jesus and you run with Him and for Him,

- Think on the fact that your life counts to God and to them.
- Your finishing the race is what history is waiting for.

What is it that you are facing right now that has made you feel like you are ready to give up?

And what is it you are focusing on?

- Is it the pain? Is it discouragement, feeling like God has forgotten you? Is it the way somebody treated you or what somebody said to you or what they have against you? Is it discouragement in the battle to stay faithful and it looks like the enemy is getting the upper hand?

I’m not saying that it’s easy. What I am saying is that if we are going to not give up, we better remember that we’re not forgotten and we’re not alone and we need to re-fix our focus on why we are here and whose we are and where Jesus is taking us.

These words that have been proved true again and again are a reminder today that you are not alone and not forgotten and as you face today and as you face tomorrow, your response needs to be, in the face of discouragement and maybe even hopelessness at times, to remember that there are millions cheering you on and counting on you and most importantly to re-fix your gaze always on Jesus—

The author and perfecter of your faith—the very one who laid hold of your heart to begin with. So run. Continue running for as long as it takes. You won’t regret it—

NOT FOREVER.