

RUNNING ON A CLOUD**Hebrews 12:1-3****Read Hebrews 12:1-3**

INTRO: I don't believe our loved ones who have gone on to glory look "down" on us from heaven. I often hear people say that dear old Mom is smiling approvingly at or even sending encouraging vibes to them. I hate to burst anyone's bubble but such thinking is Biblically, Theologically, and logically wrong. If heaven is truly a place that is free of tears as Revelation 21:4 indicates, then why would God allow them, having been promoted to their eternal reward, to see back into time and space which is full of tears and hardship.

But we still laughingly talk about someone rolling over in their grave. Like my Uncle Kenny who was a dyed in the wool Ford man, would roll over in his grave to see his grandson was driving a Chevy truck. It's fun to think of what reminds us of those we love.

On this Father's Day, how many of us instantly remember a happy time when you go to a ball game or spend some time fishing because it reminds us of when we experienced those times with our dad. It brings joy to have those happy memories of loved ones who have passed on.

A few weeks ago Evan and I were in the Garden Center at Home Depot when I saw a beautiful gardenia bush and immediately thought of my mother. She loved them and always had several around the house and the fragrance of a gardenia bloom would, no doubt, send me down memory lane. I, of course, could not leave it there. I bought it and brought it home. I also took a photo of it and sent it to my siblings. Several of them had gardenias, because it made them think of our mother. And several of them told about how their children also had gardenia plants, all for the same reason – it reminded them of Grandma. What was important to her is in turn important to us.

These loved ones are our cloud of witnesses. In so many ways, we are who we are because of their huge influence on us.

Hebrews 11 is often called the Hall of Faith where people of faith from the very beginning of time and through holy history are lauded for their faith. They were just normal people, prone to the same human failings as you and me, and yet they are recorded as men and women of faith. In our text, in Hebrews 12, the writer calls them "*a great cloud of witnesses*" and in the way our loved ones wield so much influence on us, these heroes of faith speak into our lives as well. Instead of running on empty, we run at a much higher elevation – we're running on....

A cloud of those who have gone before us.

- On the day that Emily and Evan were married I ran in the in 2014 Balloon Fest 5K. As it turns out, it was my last competitive race in my very brief race running career. Emily thought that it would be good for me to be able to run off some nervous energy before the big event that afternoon. I loved the idea and, joined by my nephew and his wife, we ran and I did fairly well considering my hip was blowing out. But the best thing of entire experience was what happened when I approached the finish line which was in the stadium. As I turned into the stadium entrance off of Katherine Avenue, I heard my name being shouted and I realized that all eight of my siblings and their spouses (all in Ashland for the wedding) were cheering me on from both sides of the track. It was such a small thing, but meant so much to have my family urging me on to the finish.
- This is how I picture the cloud of witnesses we read about here in Hebrews 12. They are in glory, they don't know my struggle, but they knew what the struggle was like, and just knowing they did, is encouragement and inspiration for the race we run ourselves.
- In other words, to quote Ecclesiastes, there is *nothing new under the Sun*. What we experience has been experienced before. Saints who have gone on before us have broken a trail for us and we need to follow their lead. When you get a chance make sure you read Hebrews 11 and notice who those saints are. They are people who struggled through life as much or more than we do. They did not live charmed lives, to use a cliché, they put their pants on one leg at a time, just like us, but they were in the Hall of Faith, for just that, their faith. When they going got rough, they knew where to look – they looked to God.
- They learned to . . .

Throw off the entangling sin

- The language used is almost violent, *let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles*. (v. 1). Don't just ignore it or cover it up or make excuses for it – THROW IT OFF! All of us can think of a particular sin that we need to deal with in our life. While that is not what the writer means – he

means that we are to be done with sin – ALL OF IT! But it doesn't hurt to focus in on a particular sin that trips us up and shuts us down.

- Sin is like a burr that only sets itself deeper the more you indulge it. (tell about Togo getting into burrs)
- We need to say yes and not to sin. Ray Stedman says “*Never say yes to Christ without saying no to something else.*” We know what that something is: it's anything and everything that hinders faith.
- And then run for the prize! We need to . . .

Persist in the mission

- That's what perseverance means: the temptation is to give up. Perseverance means not being deterred by challenges, but fueled by them. More recent members of the cloud of witnesses are five men who died trying to take the Good News to the Huaorani tribe in the Amazon Jungle region of Ecuador. Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian made contact with the fierce tribe and were suddenly killed. They persisted in the mission even though they knew it was dangerous. Did that stop the mission to the Huaorani? No. Jim Elliott's widow Elizabeth, and Nate Saint's sister Rachel, went back to the tribe and one by one, led them to Christ. They persisted. Their persistence is a witness to us.
- In the mid-1980s, Eduardo Llanos, a Cuban refugee who had been part of the Brethren in Christ Church there, planted a Brethren in Christ Church in Miami. He and his wife, Jill, struggled to infiltrate the Latin community with Jesus, but the church failed. They kept at it and planted another church a couple years later. It struggled at first, but they persisted. It began to grow and from that church other churches were planted and those churches planted churches, and those churches planted churches until 35 years after that first church failed, there are over 50 Hispanic BIC Churches in the Miami area alone. And some of those pastors returned to their countries of origin and now there are BIC Churches in Dominican Republic, Haiti, Costa Rica, Brazil, and Argentina as a result. All because Eduardo and Jill refused to give up. They persisted, and are now running on that cloud of witnesses.
- But just looking to those who were faithful to God and persistent in serving Christ will mean we sooner or later run out of steam. The writer of Hebrews points out that the greatest witness of all and the one we need to emulate the most is *the pioneer and perfecter of faith*, (v. 2) or, as another translation has it, *the author and finisher of faith*. (ESV) Jesus. Yes, we need to keep our . . .

Eyes on Jesus

- He's the prize. He's the goal. He is the finish line.
- At the 5K race I mentioned before: After I passed my brothers and sisters cheering from the sidelines, I needed to make one lap around the stadium track before I crossed the electronic finish line. I remember that other runners cranked it up a bit as they got on the track in an effort to get the best time they could. I felt like I'd used up just about all the effort I had – but that arch with the finish line under it beckoned me on. I found I had some extra energy to push on and give it one more burst. I don't know that it changed my time all that much, but I had the satisfaction in knowing I'd finished and I never gave up. That's keeping your eye on the prize.
- Specifically the author of Hebrews says that Jesus endured the scorn and the shame of the Cross and persisted and he gained the prize of sitting at the right hand of the Father. Likewise, we need to endure the same kind of opposition and keep on keeping on for the prize.
- Finally, he specifically encourages us with the promise that we will not *grow weary and lose heart*. (v.3) Opposition to our faith is not going to get less – it's probably going to get worse. Should we lash out and fight back? Jesus didn't. He said Father forgive them. Should we give up? Jesus didn't, he went to the Cross. In the end, he persisted in the mission until he said IT IS FINISHED! It was when he died that he said that, was he saying that he's lost? NOPE! He was pronouncing his mission to defeat sin accomplished. He is the author and finisher of faith and salvation. Three days elapsed and everyone knew what he meant. He's had won! Believe what it says here in scripture. Jesus did it, you can too.
- Keep your eyes on Jesus. This past week my friend Ray died. He was the farmer who gave me my first job. He gave me tremendous responsibility as he sent me out with his tractors and equipment and I was just a young kid. I remember him teaching me how to plow a straight furrow. He would put the plow in the ground and look over the hood of the big Minneapolis Moline tractor and find a point down the field and keep his eye

on that point, whether it was a tree in the fence line or a house or barn in the distance, and then he never took his eye off that object until he reached the end of the field. Looking back there was a straight furrow.

- That's what it's like as we keep our eyes on Jesus. When we look back we'll see the path we took was a lot straighter than it seemed. We will have run in the shadow of a cloud of witnesses. We will have emulated the greatest witness of all – Jesus Christ. We will have done anything but run on empty but we will have run on a cloud. Amen.