

Scripture Reading for Sunday August 18 2019

Daniel 3:13-26 (NIV)

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?”

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king’s command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. ²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, “Weren’t there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied, “Certainly, Your Majesty.” ²⁵ He said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” ²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!”

Heb 11:29-12:2 (NIV)

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. ³¹ By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better

resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

12 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, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Sermon: Running With Perseverance

It's not easy being a Christian today. Friends may not understand; relatives may look on with concern; colleagues may ask why are we willing behave differently for the sake of something or someone that's difficult to see or experience. And we can be discouraged in the church today, not least when we see attendance decline or wonder what God is doing. We're not alone; the early church also struggled with discouragement. But knowing that we're *not* alone *is* itself an encouragement!

The writer of Hebrews 11 continues his whirlwind tour of Old Testament heroes who lived “by faith” demonstrating their “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹ We heard last week about Abraham and Sarah; the writer then continues with key moments of faith in the life of Moses.² Today's reading begins with the faith of the people of Israel who believed in a God who made the seemingly impossible possible. Examples are given, such as the moment God separated the waters of the Red Sea enabling them to escape the Egyptians at the start of the Exodus.³ As they walked on the sea bed “on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left,”⁴ the *people* were demonstrating their faith in Moses and in *their* God. The writer swiftly moves on to another impossibility, the fall of Jericho under Joshua's leadership soon after they entered the Promised Land.⁵ That victory was because the people had faith that God could do for them what they could not for themselves.⁶ As part of that story, the faith of the prostitute Rahab is highlighted as she demonstrated

¹ Heb 11:1; see also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Walking-by-Faith.pdf>

² Heb 11:23-28.

³ See Exod 14:21-31.

⁴ Exod 14:22. Note there is *no* mention here of the faithlessness of the Israelites in their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years! (This is mentioned earlier in Heb 3-4.)

⁵ Josh 5:13-6:27. The Writer of Hebrews takes it for granted that his audience knew their Scriptures! I appreciate that we can't assume that today. While many of these stories are Sunday School favourites, I encourage you to re-read them.

⁶ The historicity of this battle is questionable. Nevertheless, it is part of Israel's *story* and suitable for this purpose!

her faith in Joshua and his God by protecting the two Israelite spies from the King of Jericho.⁷ Incidentally, Rahab is mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and she is also praised for her faith in the book of James.⁸ The encouraging bottom line in all is this: "Remember, *God saves his people.*"⁹

The preacher of this sermon to the Hebrews then takes a pause and says: "What more could I say - because I'm running out of time?"¹⁰ And you can imagine the audience calling out, "Tell us more!" So the writer mentions names like Gideon,¹¹ Barak,¹² Samson,¹³ Jephthah,¹⁴ Samuel, and King David.¹⁵ While some on that list seem very dubious to me, they are praised because through faith they "conquered kingdoms and administered justice."¹⁶ Then, without naming them, there is an allusion to Daniel in the lion's den,¹⁷ and to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace – our Old Testament reading.¹⁸ The drum beat continues: ". . . (and) those who escaped the edge of sword" – a likely reference to incidents in the lives of the prophets Elijah¹⁹ and Elisha.²⁰ The writer of the Hebrews then says "Women received back their dead, raised to life again,"²¹ which refers to separate miracles also through Elijah and Elisha.²² There is then mention of torture,²³ imprisonment, stoning,²⁴ even being sawn in two!²⁵ By the way, Jewish legend has it that Jeremiah was stoned to death and Isaiah was sawn in two.²⁶ The writer of Hebrews was trying to encourage his readers, who were undergoing hardships, that all these heroic individuals were never afraid to stand alone or to face immense odds for the sake of their loyalty to God. These people were approved by God,²⁷ were obedient, and they experienced suffering.

Before moving on, I asked last week who are *your* inspirational heroes of faith? One of my biblical favourites is the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.²⁸ These three Jewish officials in

⁷ See Josh 2 and Heb 11:31.

⁸ See Matt 1:5 and James 2:25. Evidently, her story makes her a well-known Jewish heroine.

⁹ "Joshua" means "God Saves" and "Jesus" is a derivative of that name; the meaning of names is important in Jewish history.

¹⁰ Heb 11:32.

¹¹ See Judges 6-8. Oddly, Gideon is praised for his faith when the fleece episode demonstrates a *lack* of faith!

¹² See Judges 4-5. Why isn't Deborah mentioned?!

¹³ See Judges 13-16. While a Sunday School favourite, Samson is at the end of a list of judges with increasingly *bad* behaviour and *poor* judgement!

¹⁴ See Judges 11-12. Why he makes this list is a mystery to me! However, like the other judges, he is a *deliverer* of his people.

¹⁵ See 1 Sam. This list is not random, but possibly favourites of his audience.

¹⁶ Heb 11:33. The connecting of "faith" with "military victories" needs to be understood as contextual conditioning.

¹⁷ See Dan 6.

¹⁸ See Dan 3.

¹⁹ See 1 Kings 19.

²⁰ See 2 Kings 6.

²¹ Heb 11:35.

²² See 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:8-37. Speaking of women, one should not overlook the story of Judith – see Judith 8-16.

²³ A reference to 2 Macc 7; Compare ". . . refusing to accept release, *in order to obtain a better resurrection*" (Heb 11:35b) with 2 Macc 7:9, the last words of the tortured 2nd brother: ". . . but the King of the universe *will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life*, because we have died for his laws" (see also 2 Macc 7:14b.)

²⁴ The prophet Zechariah was stoned to death; see 2 Chron 24:20-22.

²⁵ Heb 11:35-37.

²⁶ See *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, chapter 5: <http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/martisah.htm>

²⁷ i.e., made "righteous," see Heb 11:2,5-7,16.

²⁸ This story is considered folklore, as is Daniel in the lion's den. Their historicity is *irrelevant*; their point is to *inspire* faith!

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom refuse to bow down and worship his tall golden statue. Nebuchadnezzar is furious when he hears of their snub to his gods, but gives them one more chance to prove their allegiance and, if they still are obstinate, he threatens to throw them into a blazing furnace.²⁹ It is the bold response of the three men that I find so impressive: ". . . (they say) if we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is *able* to deliver us from it, and he *will* deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. *But even if he does not*, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will *not* serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."³⁰ Now *that's* a principled stance based on their faith in God! They know that God has delivered his people from oppression in the past - as in the exodus from Egypt. So they therefore know that God is capable of delivering them from certain death. However, *they* are not going to instigate a showdown between the one true God and Nebuchadnezzar's gods. They will serve God *regardless* of the consequences and, if they perish, the king should *not* regard that outcome as vindication. Truly amazing courage! What happens next? The king is extremely angry; he orders the fire to be superhot and for his strongest soldiers to tie them up. The furnace was so hot that soldiers died as they threw the three men into the fire! The king then leaps to his feet in amazement: "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? . . . Look, I see four men walking around the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."³¹ King Nebuchadnezzar orders them to come out of the fire, acknowledges the one true God and even promotes the three young men. In this great drama of deliverance and faith, we note that the fourth person is identified by Nebuchadnezzar as a divine being, an angel, who is alongside them in their suffering. Even the unbelieving king recognized the significance of this sign and responded with a U-turn: repentance. While this is a story of faith under religious persecution, which is not exactly the same as everyday suffering, the attitude of the three Jewish officials is, I believe, worthy of emulation. Regardless of the outcome of our prayers, we will continue to serve and honor the living God. And the story tells us we can be assured that God identifies with those who suffer and comes along side us, if we would but recognize him in our situations. Now I find that to be inspirational and courageous faith!

Let's go back to Hebrews; you can imagine the audience wondering: *Why so much suffering!* The preacher doesn't really answer that question other than to say they had "conviction of things *not seen*"³² and "the world was not worthy of them,"³³ and that "God has provided something *better*,"³⁴ namely Jesus Christ. The Greek word for "better" has already occurred many times in the book of Hebrews. We are told "Jesus is *better* (or superior) than the angels,"³⁵ there is a *better* hope,³⁶ a *better* covenant,³⁷ with *better* promises,³⁸ sealed with *better* sacrifices,³⁹ and all this allows us to persevere

²⁹ Dan 3:15b. (The statue may have been of Nebuchadnezzar himself!)

³⁰ Dan 3:17-18.

³¹ Dan 3:24-25.

³² Heb 1:1,39a.

³³ Heb 11:38a.

³⁴ Heb 11:40a.

³⁵ Heb 1:4. In all the following examples of "better" the *same* Greek word is used.

³⁶ Heb 7:19.

³⁷ Heb 7:22.

³⁸ Heb 8:6.

³⁹ Heb 9:23.

since our ultimate inheritance from God will be *better*,⁴⁰ as we wait in hope for a *better* resurrection!⁴¹ As the writer of Hebrews sees it, there should be no surprise that these faithful ancestors did not receive the promise until the coming of Jesus.⁴² These people of faith were leaning forward in hope, seeking that heavenly city whose architect and builder is God.⁴³ The “world was not worthy of them” because they were living by faith in *God’s* future while society all around them was living as though the present world was all that there is - or ever would be. And as a consequence, those heroes – like the preacher’s readers – would inevitably experience suffering *for their beliefs*.⁴⁴

There is also space on that list for other heroes of faith,⁴⁵ including more contemporary heroes. Two of mine as a young man were David Wilkerson and Brother Andrew.⁴⁶ In 1958 David was a country preacher who believed God was calling him to New York to bring Jesus Christ to those involved in street gangs. He then began *Teen Challenge* in Brooklyn and reached out to help drug addicts.⁴⁷ Brother Andrew was a Dutch missionary who smuggled Bibles through the iron curtain at the height of the Cold War in the 1950’s and 60’s.⁴⁸ With the nickname, “God’s Smuggler, he is known for having prayed, “Lord, make seeing eyes blind” when he was stopped at the border of a communist country for his car to be inspected! While I admire and am inspired by their courageous faith, that doesn’t mean *all* they did or said carries the hallmark of divine wisdom; they were men of *their* generation and acted accordingly – just like those Old Testament heroes. In addition to faith in *action*, I am also encouraged and inspired by some contemporary Christian *thinkers*, such as John Polkinghorne,⁴⁹ Lesslie Newbigin,⁵⁰ N T Wright,⁵¹ and many others⁵² who have helped shape my thinking and so help provide better foundations for my faith. As I said last week: faith needs nurturing through reading, prayer, reflection, conversation, and practice. We therefore all need such people on this pilgrimage of faith because that baton has been passed on to us here, in our generation and here in Amherstburg.

The writer of Hebrews switches to that athletic metaphor, concluding on a high note: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the

⁴⁰ Heb 10:34-35.

⁴¹ Heb 11:35b. For the context of “better resurrection” see [23].

⁴² Who is the *ultimate* High Priest – see Heb 7:28. (This High-Priest image is another key theme in Hebrews.)

⁴³ Heb 11:10,16; 12:22-24;13:14.

⁴⁴ Note this is suffering “for the sake of the gospel” (as it were; see also Matt 5:11–12; Mark 8:34–35; 2 Tim 1:8), *not* other kinds of human suffering.

⁴⁵ This is one way to consider “apart from us” in Heb 11:40, and bear in mind “perfect” can mean “complete.”

⁴⁶ Remember too that I was a “missionary kid” to Pentecostal parents!

⁴⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Wilkerson

⁴⁸ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_van_der_Bijl

⁴⁹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Polkinghorne

⁵⁰ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lesslie_Newbigin

⁵¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N._T._Wright

⁵² One could add to the list, C. S. Lewis, Clark Pinnock, Michael Green, James Dunn, William Hasker . . . and many more.

cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”⁵³ Let me end with a few brief comments on this climax.

First, the Christian life *has* a goal, an end [Greek: *telos*], for God has an overall plan for history - while being flexible with the details.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the Christian life is a patient long-distance race - *not* a quick sprint. Too many Christians lose all their energy for active, faithful living too early on the way. Consequently, be encouraged by this great this cloud of witnesses and imagine them cheering us on to the finish line!⁵⁵ Second, we may be tired but we’re still in the race, so we need to discard anything that slows us down. Consequently, we need to run the race unencumbered by distractions, trivial concerns, selfish ambitions and indulgences, resentments, and bad habits that weigh us down. Third, we look *forward* as we run with perseverance. We focus on Jesus who is described as the inspirational “pioneer,” the trail blazer whom we follow.⁵⁶ His is also the “perfecter of *our* faith,” the one who *completes* our faith, for his Spirit is with us. Jesus, then, is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Fourth, Jesus is our example. The writer points out that, just as in this catalogue of heroes of faith, Jesus too was *obedient*, he also *suffered* the shame and agony of the cross,⁵⁷ and he too was *approved* by God, for he has been raised from the dead and given “the seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus kept his eye on the ultimate “prize” and the joy that was set before him *included* bringing other runners with him to glory⁵⁸ – including us - so that he could proclaim, “Here I am and the children you have given me,” as it says in Hebrews 2.⁵⁹ Therefore, if we are tempted to lose heart; let’s keep focused on Jesus Christ and continue to run on with perseverance. Amen.

⁵³ Heb 12:1-2.

⁵⁴ This flexibility is a logical consequence of from genuine (‘libertarian’) free will.

⁵⁵ As if in a sport arena! Note the word “*martyr*” also comes from the Greek word for “witness.”

⁵⁶ Consider the lyrics of the old hymn: “Turn you eyes upon Jesus; Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim; In the light of His glory and grace.” This should not be interpreted naively as a dismissal of the reality of our sufferings. Rather, by focusing on Jesus in our struggles, we can regain *perspective*. Consider too the words of another old hymn: “Run the straight race through God’s good grace; Lift up thine eyes, and seek His face; Life with its way before us lies; Christ is the path and Christ the prize.” This certainly captures the sentiments of Heb 12:1-2.

⁵⁷ Notice the subtle difference between “for the sake of” and “instead of” in Heb 12:2 (NRSV) and the subtle difference in terms of Atonement theology. Most scholars prefer the former translation. Mentioning the crucifixion of Christ also stresses his humanity and his identification with the lowest-of-the-low in society.

⁵⁸ Heb 2:10.

⁵⁹ Heb 2:13b.