

The Development of Faith

Hebrews 12:1-3, Part 1 of 2

Disclaimer: The following are Dr. Jeff Stott's sermon notes and manuscript. They have not been carefully proofed for spelling or grammar. All Scripture quotes are from the New International Version unless noted.

Take your Bibles and turn to **Hebrews 12:1**.

I don't know what you will accomplish in your Christian life, but I can tell you that whatever you accomplish spiritually in God's kingdom will be in proportion to your faith. Jesus once said, "According to your faith will it be done to you" (Matt. 9:29, NIV). Not according to your fame. Not according to your feelings. Not according to your fortune. Not according to your friends. Not according to your fate. But according to your faith will it be done to you. Faith is the medium of exchange in the kingdom of heaven.

When you go to the grocery store to get groceries, you give them money in order to receive the groceries. In a similar way, we approach God's kingdom store and are able to receive from it by faith. You are able to receive groceries from the grocery store because you have money. You are able to receive from God's kingdom store because you have faith. The more money you have the more you can experience what's in that grocery store. The more faith you have the more you can experience what's in the kingdom of God. God wants you to experience it all. That's why He wants you to grow in your faith.

For example, the way you received salvation is through faith. **Ephesians 2:8** says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith..." (NIV). The medium of exchange between the kingdom of God and you is faith. There are a lot of blessings that God wants to give you but in His wisdom and sovereignty He has chosen the path of exchange to be through your faith. This is so significant that there are some blessings you don't receive because of your lack of faith. Jesus was in a town and wanted to bless some people, but **Matthew 13:58** says, "He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (NIV). Back to the grocery store analogy, if you only have a dollar, then you can get a dollars worth of groceries. If you have \$100 then you can receive a \$100 worth. The greater the faith the greater the blessing. One reason we do not receive some blessings is because of the lack of faith.

Now let me make myself clear. This is not deciding what you want and then believing God for it. This is learning what God wants to give you (from His Word) then believing God for that. This is not *naming it and claiming it*. This is *learning it and believing it*. This is learning what God wants to give you and then believing God for it.

So, if you are going to receive on a greater level from God's kingdom and experience the blessings that can only come through faith you must develop your faith.

How do we develop a strong and dynamic faith? In Hebrews 11 God has given us an entire chapter on what others accomplished by faith. Then in Hebrews 12 He begins to give us some direction on how to develop and grow that kind of faith. Look with me at **Hebrews 12:1-3**.

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) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

From those three verses we see several things God would have us to do that would result in a greater level of faith. These things will help develop a dynamic faith in your life. We begin looking at them today, but we will finish with them next week.

1. Our faith is developed by saturating our minds with God's Word: "Therefore"

The first thing mentioned is: our faith is developed by saturating our minds with God's Word. Notice **verse 1** begins with "Therefore." It refers us to what has already been said – in this case, the entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews, which is devoted to the subject of faith and contains references to almost all of the Old Testament. The point is that the Bible is a book that will develop your faith. Even **Romans 10:17** says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (KJV).

If you are going to develop your faith as a believer then you need to know the Bible. The Bible is going to tell you what is really true so your faith can stand on reality, rather than mere human assumption. If you want to grow in faith you must study God's Word, think about it, and obey it. As you do you will discover your faith growing and becoming stronger. You will find it easier to trust God in greater difficulty.

2. Our faith is developed by the example of others: “a great cloud of witnesses”

Number two, our faith is developed by the example of others. There are others who have lived a life of faith that you can gain encouragement and motivation from. Look at **Hebrews 12:1** again, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses....” The “cloud of witnesses” are all those faithful believers just mentioned in chapter 11. We are to run the race of faith like they did, always trusting, never giving up, no matter what the obstacles or hardships or cost.

They knew how to live a life of faith. They opposed Pharaoh, they passed through the Red Sea, shouted down the walls of Jericho, conquered kingdoms, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, received back their dead by resurrection, were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, and lived in poverty all for the sake of God’s kingdom and they did it by faith and they all received God’s reward.

God’s Word says “we are surrounded by” a “cloud of witnesses.” This is not referring to them standing in some kind of heavenly stadium surrounding earth. Those believers before us are not up in heaven looking down on us and watching our every move and seeing how we perform. The idea here is not that we should be faithful so that we don’t disappoint them, or that we should try to impress them like a sports team trying to impress the fans in the bleachers. This “cloud of witnesses” is to God, not of us. They are examples not onlookers. They have proved by their testimony, their witness, that the life of faith in God is the only life to live.

This “cloud of witnesses,” they are a testimony, an example, they are evidence that God works in, through and for those who trust Him. Nothing is more encouraging than the successful example of someone who has “done it before.” Seeing how God was with them encourages us to trust that He will also be with us. The same God who was their God is our God. The God of yesterday is the God of today and tomorrow. He has not weakened, or lost interest in His people, or lessened His love and care for them. We can run as well as they did. It has nothing to do with how we compare with them, but in how our God compares with theirs. Because we have the same God, He can do the same things through us if we trust Him.

As we remember them and think of others in our lives who have lived for God well our faith is sharpened. As iron sharpens iron so one sharpens another. Because of how they lived we are encouraged to not give up but to remain faithful. Our faith is strengthened because of their testimony of faithfulness.

3. Our faith is developed by removing hindrances: “throw off everything that hinders”

So how can we grow in our faith in God? For one, we need to saturate our minds with the Word of God. We have to find out what is really true and then begin believing that. Secondly, we need to remember those who have already walked by faith and gain encouragement from their example. When we are tempted to walk in doubt, we need to remember those who have walked in faith. **Number three, our faith is developed by removing spiritual hindrances.** Notice **verse 1** where the Bible says, “Let us throw off everything that hinders.” One translation says, “Let us lay aside every encumbrance” (NASB). Another one says, “Let us lay aside every weight” (KJV, HCSB). What is this hindrance, encumbrance, and weight the Bible is talking about? This “hindrance” (onkos) is simply a bulk or mass of something. It is not necessarily bad in itself. Often it is something perfectly innocent and harmless. But it weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our energy, dampens our enthusiasm for the things of God. We cannot run the race in order to win if we are carrying excess weight. The problem is not in what the weight is but in what it does. It keeps us from running well and therefore from winning the race marked out for us.

Picture the start of a marathon. The lean Kenyan runners are at the front near the starting line waiting for the race to begin. A couple of skinny American runners are standing beside them as well. Next to them is a fat, flabby guy wearing a long sleeve jacket, all-weather pants, hiking boots, with a 50-pound back pack. You ask curiously, “What’s in your pack?” He says, “I’ve got all the sodas and Twinkies that I’ll need for the race.” You’re thinking, “Right, this guy doesn’t stand a chance of finishing let alone winning, because he has not laid aside every hindrance.”

A “hindrance” is distinguished here from sins. They include things that are not intrinsically wrong, but they’re wrong for you because they keep you from running as you should. If you got rid of those hiking boots and put on some jogging shoes, you’d run better. If you dropped the pack and dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, you might finish the race.

At the risk of stepping on some toes, but to help you apply this, let me get more specific. Let’s say that in the morning, you don’t have time to read God’s Word and catch up on the news or your friends through face book before you go to work or school. You only have time to do one. Which do you choose? Maybe you don’t have time to read anything because you don’t set your alarm early enough to spend just 10 minutes with the Lord. You need to shed the hindrance of loving sleep or Facebook

more than God. There is nothing wrong with sleep or Facebook, but for you it has become a hindrance or a weight that is slowing you down spiritually.

Too much recreation can be another hindrance in your faith race. We all need to enjoy recreation and times of relaxation. Some enjoy golf, some enjoy watching good movies on TV, others enjoy playing computer games, or working in the yard. There is nothing wrong with these activities but if they are keeping you from God's Word, from doing ministry, or being a significant part of a body of believers then they have become a hindrance that you need to remove.

These are the kinds of weights, hindrances, and encumbrances God is talking about. What hinders you may not hinder someone else. Your *weight* will look a lot different than someone else's. Your hindrance may not be a hindrance for someone else. Don't worry about someone else's hindrance, take care of your own.

4. Our faith is developed by dealing with unbelief: "the sin that so easily entangles"

Number four, our faith is developed by dealing with unbelief. Notice **verse 1** again where it says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." An even more significant hindrance to Christian living is sin. Obviously all sin is a hindrance to Christian living, and the reference here may be to sin in general. But the use of the definite article (the sin) seems to indicate a particular sin. And if there is one particular sin that hinders the race of faith it is *unbelief*, doubting God. Doubting and living in faith contradict each other. Unbelief "entangles" the Christian's feet so that he cannot run. It wraps itself around us so that we trip and stumble every time we try to move for the Lord, if we try at all. It "easily entangles" us. When we allow sin in our lives, especially unbelief, it is quite easy for Satan to keep us from running.

But the phrase "the sin" could refer to *the sin* you personally struggle with. The Bible mentions several sins such as lying, stealing, gossiping, favoritism, critical spirit, unwholesome talk, bitterness, controlling spirit, slander, greed, lust, and a host of others. However, God says we need to get rid of these sins because they easily entangle us and trip us.

Conclusion

I want you to notice we are told to “throw off” or lay aside these hindrances and sin. But how are we to do that? How do you lay aside these things so you can run the race of your life in such a way as to win?

You have to make a decision. You have to decide that you are tired of the hindrances in your life and the sin in your life. You have to choose to begin living like a winner. You will have to make the decision to throw it off and get rid of the habits and sins in your life that are slowing you down. You can do this. Your life will be more joyful, more fulfilling, and more rewarding. God has given you a life to live, a race to run... decide to run it well. Prepare yourself and run it like the champion you were created to be.

Secondly, you have to repent. You are going to have to change the way you think about your life, about your sin, and about the way you are living your life. To repent is to turn away from something to something. That something is a Someone and His name is Jesus. **Acts 3:19** says, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (NIV).