



# HEROES FROM HEBREWS



God's Formula for Champions –  
Hebrews 12:1–3  
Tim Badal | September 9, 2018

Over the past few weeks we've been studying Hebrews 11 and the stories of men and women who lived lives of great faith. They weren't perfect people—in fact, their lives at times had some ugly aspects. But they dealt with all kinds of hardships, and the author of Hebrews wants us to see how ordinary people still did extraordinary things because of their extraordinary God.

As we turn the page from Hebrews 11, we see in chapter 12 that the writer is now speaking to us. He's asking us, "In light of all I've written about these men and women who showed strong faith, despite the turbulent circumstances they dealt with, what will you now do? What kind of faith story are you writing in your life? What race are you running?"

It's really of no value if we simply agree that these people were awesome, but then decide we can never be like them. It's as though we're putting their stories on our bookshelves beside other biographies of great people, never realizing that the same Holy Spirit Who lived in them also lives in us. But in fact, He can enable us—right where we live today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—to do equally amazing things for God, to live like these men and women did, trusting and obeying. But to do that, we have to respond to the question the writer of Hebrews is asking: what will your response be?

He says, "If you want to live like these people did, if you want to succeed in this walk of faith, then your mind needs to be focused on a certain Person." Without that formula, if you will, we're going to fail. Let's read his formula in Hebrews 12:1–3:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Have you ever noticed that when someone finds success in something, you gravitate to wanting to find out how they did it? Maybe it's someone in business. You've seen an entrepreneur do awesome things. Being in the food business, when I go to Portillo's I'm always impressed with the realization that Dick Portillo started his whole enterprise in a little trailer that had a hose hooked up to it in a parking lot, then grew it to a multi-million-dollar conglomerate. As a guy who loves food and who's involved with serving food, I want to ask Dick, "How did you do it? What's the secret to your success?"

We ask the same question of money managers. Someone goes from the middle class to great wealth through savvy business deals or financial planning, and we ask, "How did you amass such riches?" We ask these questions regarding fitness or weight loss. We want to know how they hit their goals. We have five or six in our congregation who will be running in the Chicago Marathon for World Vision. I'm blown away watching them run. I can't imagine running 26.2 miles. I want to know what their secret is.

We could go on and on. In fact, if you go to the Amazon bookstore, you can find more than 6,000 titles under the heading, "The Secret of Success." And these secrets include all sorts of things. There are even conferences where pastors can learn how megachurch pastors have built their churches, learning what their key ideas and plans were. There always seem to be "six keys to this" or "seven steps to that" or "five ways to reach your goal." We are enamored with how someone has found success.

The writer of Hebrews wrote this letter to a group of people he wanted to be successful. Of course, the success he was focused on wasn't fitness or weight loss or entrepreneurial achievement or other worldly categories of success. Rather, he wanted them to

succeed in their Christian life, which is a very different sort of success. In fact, his audience was feeling beaten down and ostracized in their world.

As we learned in Hebrews 10, these men and women had lost property because of their faith. They had lost friendships and family relationships because of their faith. Some of them had lost their freedom and were imprisoned for their faith. Some had been beaten or physically abused. So the writer of Hebrews understood that among these people gathered to hear the letter read, a lot of them were probably ready to give up. They were tempted to throw away their confidence in Christ and go back to being just like the world.

His strong word to them was this: "Don't give up hope. Don't give up your confidence in Christ. Following Him is worth it all." Then in Hebrews 11, he gave them a list of people who in the past had lived for God and through whom God did great things. And now in chapter 12, he's asking them (and us) the question, "How will you respond?"

However, he doesn't just leave the question unanswered. Rather, he gives us a formula for finding success in our Christian walk. I've broken his formula down into four ways we can be successful. But remember, these aren't just one man's ideas. God through His Holy Spirit is giving us His formula for success.

## **This formula involves learning from the best.**

If we want to succeed in this race called the Christian life, we need to learn from the best. We're told in Hebrews 12:1 that we're "*surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses....*" He's obviously referring to the individuals whose lives we've been studying over the past months: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, the people of Israel, David, Barak, Gideon and Samson. Not only these, but also countless nameless people who did great things for God in victory and who remained steadfast even in defeat. He is telling us that we can look to all of these as being people who can teach us. There are a couple things we need to be aware of as we do this.

First, it's common to revere these saints of old to the point where we elevate them to a position that almost competes with God. Nowhere in the Bible are we called to worship or pray to any saint. You might have come from a background that did that. If you did, I want to say lovingly that it's not to be found in Scripture. The Bible does not contain a single example of someone praying to another person for any sort of help. That idea is a human concoction.

This great cloud of witnesses is proclaiming something to us, but it doesn't mean we're to respond by worshiping them. In fact, these individuals would assure us that there's only one Person Who deserves praise and glory, and that person is Jesus Christ. But these witnesses are given to us as examples. In fact, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10 that these people were both good and bad examples. The Bible doesn't just give us Pollyanna stories. Quite frankly, it contains some very ugly stuff, as we've seen in our studies of the Old Testament.

Yet we can still learn a lot from these people, because they are "the best." Notice that the Bible calls them "witnesses," which implies that they're speaking to us. Does that mean we're to commune with them? No, it means that their lives speak volumes to us. As one theologian has said, some of the best sermons are seen rather than heard. So, as we look at these heroes of the faith, we need to remember that we too should not only preach truth, but we should also live it out.

As we run our race, are people only hearing our talk or are they also watching how we walk? I promise, you will not keep an audience long if you're preaching about Christ, His Kingdom and His work if you are not also living it out—and that's true for me as well. We call that hypocrisy. These men and women were not hypocrites. Instead, they lived out their faith. They did the hard work, and we can learn from their examples. Which is something we do a lot—we want to learn from the best.

My son Noah is advancing quite rapidly in his pursuit of basketball. His coaches have called him to the next level so he will have more opportunity for training and practice. Noah asked me recently, "Dad, I really think I can get to the place where I can be of more value to my team, but I need help." I responded, "Son, I'm here for you."

"Dad, that's not what I was thinking. At your best, you're about as good as I am." I thought, "What are you talking about? Let's go out and play." We did, and I lost 11-3. I wasn't good enough. That's okay. I was an average basketball player in high school and I'm even less of an average basketball player now. In a lot of ways, Noah has surpassed me.

We went on a search for someone who could coach him. We found a young man in our area who had won a couple state championships and had played NCAA basketball for a large university. He's now playing professional ball in Europe. He has the pedigree. He knows what it is to be a champion and how to take his craft to the next level. Noah has been working with him.

We want the best and the brightest to be teaching us. We want to know that we're learning from someone who has experienced victory in the place where we ourselves have been defeated. This is why we turn to the saints. It's not because they're like God, or even because they're greater than we are in some weird spiritual way, but they have been victorious in ways we haven't yet experienced. This means we need to devour the Old Testament, because in it are stories of people whose lives have been impacted by God and who can be examples and encouragement to us. We need to learn from the best.

## This formula involves letting nothing slow us down.

The writer of Hebrews now takes the running metaphor to a new level. We're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, which pictures us entering an arena where the men and women who have gone before us are cheering us on. They're calling us to live the life of faith they lived.

But as we run our race, the author says, "Let nothing slow you down." He breaks this down by mentioning two things that can slow us down. Continuing in Hebrews 12:1 we read, "*Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.*" If you've ever watched a marathon, you know they wear a bare minimum of clothing. They don't want any encumbrances. They don't wear baggy clothes—everything is tight to their bodies, so nothing keeps them from running their race well. If you've watched the Chicago or Boston or New York marathons, you've never seen any of those Kenyan guys wearing a parka and rain boots. Why not? Because that would slow them down.

There are things in our lives that will also slow us down in our Christian race. I want to be careful here. The writer isn't calling the weights "sin." He separates the two, saying there are things that slow us down, then there are sins that actually entangle us. This means there can be good and noble things in our lives that can still slow us down in our race for Christ—and maybe you aren't even aware of them.

As you probably know, the church is really good at telling us what the bad things are—even though the Bible doesn't list them. The church has developed a list of sins that go beyond what the Bible calls sin. We are quite willing to tell others what good things are really bad for them. That's legalistic on our part. These things he's referring to may well be good and right things that are to be pursued and enjoyed.

The problem comes when we elevate something good until it replaces what really matters, thus the good things can slow us down in our pursuit of truly important things. This is where you, as a good Christian with your thinking cap on, need to look at your own life. Instead of me giving you a list of things, ask yourself, "What is really slowing me down? What good things that God has given me for my enjoyment have added weight to my life, dragging down my ability to run well?"

Let me give you an example from my life. I have become more and more convinced that I am tethered to my smart phone. There are a lot of good things about smart phones, but I find myself connected to it in ways I don't think are altogether right. No one has called me on this, saying, "Tim, you're on your phone too much." But this tool I use for work and ministry and many other things goes everywhere with me and I'm always tempted to be looking at it.

Then I came across this picture in an article I was reading. It says, "What if we began to treat our Bible the way we treat our cell phones?" Your cell phone is not bad. There's nothing inherently sinful in a phone that has transistors and all those different things in it. But what if we ask ourselves these questions:

- What if we started to carry our Bible around like we carried our cell phone?
- What if we turned back to get it if we forgot it? That one hit me. I can't live without my cell phone. I don't care how late I am—if I don't have my cell phone, it's like my security blanket, I will go back and find it. If I lose my cell phone, I lose my mind. But a lot of us, when we lose our Bibles, it's no real problem.
- What if we checked it for messages throughout the day?
- What if we used it in case of an emergency? We're ready to have our cell phone in case of emergency, but are we ready to use God's Word in that way?
- What if we spent an hour or more using it each day? This one really got me after the second one had already hit me. I just want you to know that screen time in America, according to every study that's been done, averages between six and eight hours. That's TV, movies, computer, cell phones. What kind of church might we be if a fraction of that time was dedicated



to God and His Word? That is an issue that I as a pastor have to get beyond. And you need to ask as well, “What is the good thing in my life that I’m more enamored with than I am with God and His Word and His promises?” The writer of Hebrews says, “You’ve got to face this and get rid of it, because it’s slowing you down.

The second thing he warns us about is sin. This is a little easier to understand, because the Bible tells us what it is. It’s immorality and idolatry. It’s the sins of the mind, the mouth, the heart and the hands. We know what sin is from the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, plus we see them substantiated and expanded upon in the New Testament. Jesus’ teachings reveal to us the depths to which our sins can go.

But some of us are running our races entangled by sin. We need to realize that what the writer of Hebrews was envisioning in this image was not the paved roadways on which our races are run. Instead, runners went on paths that wound their way through all kinds of terrain. According to secular writers, it wasn’t uncommon for a marathon runner to get caught up in vines and branches along the pathway. As they ran, weeds and branches and vines could easily trip them, to the extent that they were even injured. At best, they would have to stop running.

Think about this: There are good and noble things that can slow us down, but sin can stop us in our tracks spiritually. We have scrapes and bruises—not because we are wearing too many layers of clothing which slow us down, but because sin has tripped us up and effectively stopped our race, at least for the moment.

We therefore need to ask ourselves, “What sins am I susceptible to that might trip me up?” If we’re aware of what these are, we can steer clear of them when we see them ahead of us on our road. Remember, Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” We’re asking Him to go before us to push away those sins to which we’re most susceptible. We don’t want to be tripped up by sin and not be able to run the race marked out for us.

We need to remember that the race we’re running is marked out by God Himself, which means it’s possible that our course is not one we particularly like. We see other runners running on more level ground or maybe even downhill, and we think to ourselves, “They’re doing better than I am because their track is much less challenging.” There’s truth to that. Some of us have been given easier races to run, without major obstacles. But others of us seem to encounter one challenge after another. We have to recognize that God Himself assigns us our course. That’s why it’s so important that we look to Him to guide us along the way.

## **This formula involves leaving everything on the track.**

Have you ever noticed that at the end of the marathon race, they’re not walking around saying, “I could run another two or three miles”? No, they’ve expended all they have. They are exhausted. Notice in the text that it doesn’t say, “Let us *walk* with perseverance,” or saunter or lolly-gag or coast. He says “run.” This word in the Greek is the most vigorous expression of what we can do physically. We’re being called to give our all to the race.

Maybe today you’re not feeling out of breath. Maybe you’re not sweating spiritually. That means there’s something wrong. You’re not running the race as hard as you can. You need to be pushed a little harder. That’s why the writer of Hebrews uses these great men and women to set the pace for us.

If you’re thinking, “My life of faith is pretty easy,” let’s go look at Noah for a minute. It took him 120 years to build the ark, and it had never rained. Let’s imagine the faith of Abraham, whom God had tested by telling him to sacrifice his son, before providing him with a sacrificial lamb. Imagine the children of Israel who walked around Jericho for seven days before the walls came down.

We too need to run the race set before us with perseverance. Not walk. Not dilly-dally. Run. And the writer tells us specifically that it will require endurance and perseverance. It won’t be easy. The Christian life is difficult, requiring grit and tenacity. At times we’ll be tempted to give up. How do we keep going? How do we not give in?

## **This formula involves looking to Jesus every step of the way.**

Here’s what the writer tells us to do in Hebrews 12:2–3: *“Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”*

How do we not give up? The formula we’re given is this: look to Jesus. He is the founder of our faith. Literally, that means Jesus is the source of it. He is also the nutrients our faith needs to grow. He is the sustainer of our faith.

Returning to the illustration of a marathon, as the runners are going along the course, there are checkpoints where there will be people who hand them water. It would be completely foolish for a runner to run by those points without taking the water. Why? Because without water he would not be able to run much farther.

Just as the runner needs the water and the other nutrients he's given along the way, we also need spiritual water and nutrients from Jesus or we will be disqualified, because we'll give up the race. That's why many people who call themselves Christians but who are never deeply connected to Christ but are only involved in some religious activities, soon shrivel up and walk away. They're not drinking from the source of their faith—Jesus Himself.

Along with being the founder of our faith, Jesus is also the perfecter of our faith. Whatever our issues or shortcomings are, Jesus by His grace can sustain us and perfect us, so we will be able to finish the race. As a true child of God, you should never wonder, "Will I finish the race?" As Paul told us in Philippians 1:6, "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*" He is with us in this race, so we don't need to doubt that we'll be able to complete it.

Where is that place of completion? It's the right hand of the throne of God. We run to be in the presence of God. The people in Hebrews 11 ran to be in the presence of God. One day, as Paul says, when we finish the race, what will await us is a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8). We will stand before God and we'll hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

That's what our goal is and I will tell you, when we get there, it will be worth every step of the marathon. It will be worth every cramp, every stomach ache, every hardship we experience in this race when we look into the face of Jesus. We'll spend eternity with Him, where there will be no more pain, no more sorrow, no more weeping, no more sin. The old will be gone and the new will be reality.

But until then, we look to Jesus. Notice a couple things we're told here about Jesus. First, His race wasn't easy. He endured hostility and suffering. There will be difficulty along the way for us as well. Yet how did Jesus run His race? With joy in His heart. That seems to be an oxymoron. How do we run experiencing pain and sorrow with hearts filled with joy?

It's the same way a pregnant mother in labor suffers the birth pangs. She is excited at the same time, because she knows that just when the pain will be worst, her child will be welcomed into the world. For the joy set before her, she is able to endure the difficulty of birth.

That's what we do as well. Though it is hard, though there are times when we want to give up, we run with perseverance because we know the end is way better than the race itself. I cannot tell you how awesome it will be to be in heaven with our Lord and Savior. So, keep running with perseverance, because at the end of it all it will be worth it.

I learned a number today: 21%. That's how many people who start a marathon never finish. I will tell you, that number is even higher for those who say they start the Christian race, but then get out. Maybe today you've never started that race, or maybe you've thought you started it, but you didn't stay with it. I want you to know that every day brings a new opportunity for you to bow your knee to Jesus and to get in the race. Get in, then run it with all your heart.

Jesus says that once we enter the race, He is faithful to see us complete it—and He tells us it will all be worth it in the end. God wants you and me to be heroes, just as these men and women were. But in order to be heroes to the next generation, we have to run this race with endurance. Will you run it to the best of your ability, looking to Jesus every step of the way?