

Once again they're cleaning up in Moore from a tornado. You know of course that Wednesday night serious storms developed and dropped a relatively small tornado. The damaged areas weren't far from the damaged areas of just two years ago. In fact the Taylor family, members at Holy Cross who are having a house built on the same site where a house was destroyed two years ago, narrowly missed being hit again. An interview with the pastor of a Moore church revealed the very same steeple knocked off and destroyed on Wednesday was also knocked off in 2013.

As residents of Moore regroup and once again go about the work of cleaning up and rebuilding how do they keep going? When you're still recovering and rebuilding from previous destruction how do you keep your resolve to carry on? It seems things around us are so out of control that any day whatever we've built or accumulated could be blown away. It's happened twice in two years in the same area. When a goal can be destroyed so easily it seems hard to keep going.

As Jesus takes his Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem in the gospel we jump over to the second lesson and examine it. There the writer to the Hebrews gives encouragement and motivation focused in the only place that could keep us going in life...

Fix your eyes on Jesus
Great example of faith
Object and cause of your faith

Three years ago on the trip some members and I made to Knoxville, TN for the international youth rally on the last day we wandered over to look at the imposing stadium of the University of Tennessee. It was huge just standing outside of it. That's when we noticed people walking inside. The entrance gate was open. We made our way inside towards the stands and down to the field level. Since the wall separating field from stands wasn't high, kids and adults were already dropping onto the field. Young people were running pretend plays on the 50 yard line. We followed and soon enough we were standing on a real college football field looking up at 100,000 seats. If I closed my eyes I could imagine catching passes and running for touchdowns while fans cheered.

Is that what you picture when the writer to the Hebrews talks about a great cloud, a stadium filled with people? **"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..."** Who are these witnesses? The previous chapter names some. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Many more could have been mentioned. They're the heroes of faith. But they aren't watching from some heavenly stadium looking down and cheering us on. Grandmas and grandpas don't really have knowledge of what we do. That's not how they witness. These heroes of faith witness to us; that is their life, work, sufferings, and death all testify to what faith is, God's promises, and God's faithfulness. Through them we see that faith is worth it.

With a whole chapter dedicated to naming heroes of faith, we might think when Jesus is introduced he's just another example. In the gospel we heard about his arrival into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey on Palm Sunday. We carried palm branches into church to remember that moment singing praise to Jesus. But never mind the palm branches, the shouting, or the praise. Jesus is getting ready for some very difficult days. The crowds who loved him would soon be part of the group turning on him. Jesus was headed to the cross. Not something to take lightly. Not something that would be easy. And Jesus had other options. **Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame."** He sized up the situation and chose to persevere to the cross. He scorned the cross' shame. He didn't minimize the suffering but focused instead on the goal. He ran a race that was leading to the suffering of the cross even as he entered Jerusalem. His perseverance and choice to go to the cross is a testimony to his strength. He's going and nothing will stop him. That's got to be a great example of faith.

If Christ Jesus is only a great example of faith that we need to model and follow in order to gain anything from God then we're in trouble. If Christ is only a great example of faith just like all the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews chapter eleven then we're lost. True enough, everything Jesus did was a great example since he was perfect. He was exactly what God wanted every human being to be. But if we're expected to achieve that level of perfection by following Jesus' example we won't be able to do it. We can't be perfect. Not now, not ever. Jesus must be more if we are to fix our eyes on him.

A quick glance towards the heroes of faith sees they're a lot like us, people who suffered and hurt. Noah faced ridicule while he built an ark when it wasn't raining and there was no open water nearby. He also heard the screams as people died in the flood waters that followed. Abraham had problems constantly passing his wife off as his sister so he wouldn't be killed by the king who wanted her for his own. Joseph rotted in prison for a crime he never committed. Moses killed a man and ran away. Each was a sinner, sometimes openly sometimes hidden. A quick glance tells us all we need to know. Their example is not one to follow.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. Bring your gaze back to him. Christ is more than example to follow. He's your object of faith. It is Christ who we must believe in to be saved. Christ's work described in the second lesson even in brief is what we must believe. What Jesus did on Palm Sunday and all throughout Holy Week, those events are the object of our faith. We believe in them and we are saved. Christ is also the cause of our faith. Jesus provides the basis for your faith. In him are promises from God met and fulfilled. In him promises from God are still to be concluded. Jesus is the reason you have faith. He perfects your faith, gives it meaning, and finishes it.

Perseverance is the ability to face stress and difficulty and not give up. It's going to work even when you don't feel like it because you know you've got things to finish. It's working through math homework when you don't get it at first. Of course stress and difficulty keep coming from all sides. Not giving up is the hardest part. Even persecution may come. It may not be here right now like it is overseas where Christians are being forced from their homes and killed for what they believe. But it isn't much of a stretch to think someday it might happen here. Perseverance will be needed to face whatever might come. Perseverance is also needed now in the way we treat our government and elected officials. We may not agree, we may strenuously disagree, but don't add stress or difficulty by worrying or sinning. We stress ourselves out over events we can't control. We sin and feel guilt when we bad mouth elected leaders and don't speak well of them. Every day we face death because of all of our sins. **"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."** Those sins and guilt are like weights constantly hanging around our necks hindering us. Good choices are impossible.

Throwing that off happens only by fixing your eyes again on Jesus, the Savior who threw off everything that could possibly hinder him. No sin, no guilt, nothing could entangle Jesus as he made his way to the cross. The suffering, pain, carrying of all the sins of all people was all in front of him on Palm Sunday. The cross would mean torture and disgrace unimaginable. But Jesus held up. You and I were too important. The plan was too rock solid. The joy was too great. He became our Savior. He won the fight. He won the race in our place for us. **"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."** Jesus is the beginning and end of our faith, object and cause.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus is a lifelong process. Every day we fight against sin and its temptations. No hero of faith, no grandparent, no faithful relative can provide an example for us to get to heaven. Since that's true we must always be looking to Jesus. Only Christ fills us with faith, keeps us in the faith, and crowns our faith with ultimate victory. Many things may dishearten us along the way but keeping our eyes on Christ causes our faith to grow stronger and our stamina to live faithful to him easier.

I don't know what will keep the people in Moore rebuilding after this latest setback. I suppose for some it will just be what they do. Pick up the pieces and move on. If you or I suffer we have something better. It isn't the example of anyone else. Only fixing our eyes on Jesus, perfect example of faith as well as object and cause of our faith.