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Running Partners
Hebrews 11:1-12:1

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If you have ever experienced the start of a running race you will understand what the writer of the book of Hebrews means about running with a cloud of witnesses. At the start of a race you arrive from your various points of origin, pick up your racing numbers, and file en mass to the starting line. You huddle together listening to the race director give the instructions. Then you pick a spot where you think you won't be trampled and where you won't be trampling others. And the next thing you know the cloud of runners is moving. The sound of the gun, the adrenaline, the stammering of hundreds of pair's feet, and the collective momentum instantly propels you forward. You are swept up in the pace of it and carried away with these fellow runners. Some of them you may know and some of them may be total strangers but for the next however many minutes of the race you will be running partners.

You will encourage each other when the race gets long, you will warn each other of tricky turns or potholes, you will complain to each other when your feet hurt and your muscles ache. These people understand your pain; they understand this experience you are going through. There is a great sense of companionship with this cloud of witnesses who remind you of how you can get from the start line safely across the finish line.

The author's letter to the Hebrew people is trying to offer them some of this same companionship. The letter wants them to know they are not alone. They do not run their races without running partners but are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The author reminds them of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel. These are there running partners; these are your running partners. All of them ready to be called upon at a moments notice when you need them; they have been there before, they have been tested and tried like you have been. They have run these races and they want to help you get through your own race.

So here is the line up of runners to accompany you on your race:

- Abel who was faithful and his brother hated him for it. He knows a thing or two about being picked on.
- Enoch knew about being a regular guy who lived and died for the Lord. He'd tell you about trying to do right by the world.
- Noah was a visionary and a planner and the town called him a lunatic. He can tell you a story about feeling isolated.
- Abraham was asked to make a great sacrifice. He will tell you about the challenges of being faithful.
- Isaac had a rough start to life. He would offer you some advice on forgiving your parents and trying to do right by your own children.
- Jacob was a crook and a liar and he was tormented by his decisions. He'd like to explain to you what the grace of God is all about.
- Sarah found out too soon she could not protect her child from the dangers of the world. She would be able to comfort you when were up at night worrying about your kids.
- Moses had been through it all a time or too. He is a wise old man who would tell you about the seasons of success and seasons of disappointment.
- Gideon struggled with fear and indecisiveness. He'd listen to your doubts and tell you not to be too hard on yourself.
- Barak worked with Deborah and Jael to fulfill God's purpose. He would remind you to ask others for help.
- Samson was the strong man who could knock down buildings with his arms. He can tell you about needing to be strong for others.
- Jephthah was abandoned by his family when he needed them, then they showed up for help when they needed him. He can tell you about the pain families can cause.
- David can tell you about having huge talents and making huge errors. He would like to help you to learn from his mistakes.
- Samuel was swayed by popular opinion and gave the people a king. He can tell you what it is like to live with regret and heartache.

These were the running partners selected for the Hebrews. The Hebrews knew the stories of the Old Testament but they needed reminders of how these characters could help them. These rich biblical stories offer insight, example, and witness to the Hebrews in their trials and tribulations. And these stories and characters have the ability to speak to us in the same way. Probably most things that you deal with in your life can be found encountered in the bible: family dramas, betrayed friendships, falling in love, having children, fighting you're your in-laws, growing old, making big mistakes, facing death, waging war, resenting work, being angry at God. It is all in there. These biblical characters come to life for us when we read the stories and say "that sounds strangely familiar." Often we can relate to the sentiments expressed in the bible.

I feel hopeless like Sarah when she could not conceive a child. I feel ashamed like Judas when he committed betrayal. I feel cheated like Martha when Mary was not doing her part. I feel lonely like Joseph when his brothers would not include him. I feel scared like Elizabeth and Mary when they were unsure of their pregnancies. I feel angry like Jonah when he did not want to listen to God. I feel determined like Nehemiah when he went to rebuild his destroyed city. These people, these stories are our running partners; this is the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us as we seek to run our own races with perseverance.

A year ago I had lunch with Ernie Campbell, a famous preacher from Riverside Church in New York City. Ernie is retired now but has many words of wisdom for fellow preachers. I asked him what he thought the difference was between people in the pews today and people in the pews when he was starting out as a preacher. He immediately responded, "Biblical literacy"...then he added, "You say David and people think you are talking about Letterman. You say Daniel and people think you are talking about Daniel Boone." But what he said next surprised me, "he said it is more fun to be a preacher today because you get to tell people the stories of the Old and New Testament and often times it's the first time they have ever heard the story."

Some of these stories might be unfamiliar to you and that is ok. Some of these characters you probably think I just made up, I didn't but does not matter if you know them all by name. You are not going to be quizzed on your bible knowledge but you should be aware that these people

are there for you when you need them. The bible is full of people and stories that can give counsel, example, and witness to us throughout the twists and turns of life. But we also have our own characters that we would add to the list of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us.

There are people who have run with us for a season of our lives and have offered encouragement or example or just company. A grandparent who taught us about faith or sacrifice or value. A friend who taught us about outlook or fortitude or selflessness. A colleague who taught us about respect or hard work or balance. A teacher who taught us about listening or caring or believing. We have people in our lives that have given us examples of running the race of life and faith with perseverance.

If I think of my own cloud of witnesses that surrounds me as I face hardships or transitions or difficult decisions I see names and faces of people, some living some no longer. Some who I still talk to and some who have drifted away. Some who I know personally and some who are known to me only through their work or words. And some of these are people I know only from the bible. Joshua as he took over leadership for Moses, helps me to not freak out when I think about taking on responsibility I am not sure I am ready to handle. Ruth as she stayed with Naomi, when I try to give enough of myself to my friends and family. Jesus as he walked the streets and preached the word and healed the broken, when I am tempted to feel complacent. These people and many others are those who surround me and sustain me: my own cloud of witnesses.

This is what the author was trying to do with the Hebrews, trying to remind them of the witnesses they had around them so that they might be strengthened for their own races. This is what I would ask you to remember today, you do not run the race alone. A great cloud of witnesses surrounds you as you run. Helpful reminders of these people like those offered to the Hebrews are good for us too. Do something to remind yourself of your running partners: take a verse from scripture and attach it to your mirror, take a photograph of your hero and put it on your desk, call an old friend and meet them for coffee, send a card to someone who gives you hope, visit the grave of your loved one whose memory stays with you. Be strengthened, be encouraged, be sustained by your own cloud of witnesses. And remember the words we heard

today, “set aside every weight and sin and run the race with perseverance.” Your faith and example joins in with the cloud of witnesses of God’s people running the race of faith. And the good news is that at the finish line you will be welcomed by that cloud of witnesses and by God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!