One of the TV shows that Beth and I enjoy watching together is *This Old House*. Last season on the show they did something a little different. They brought in some interns to help with the house they were building. The whole point was that they were trying to encourage new people to enter into the building trades. Most of the guys on the show like Norm Abrams or Tommy Silva were on the show when it started 40 years ago. The building trades largely look the same. Not a lot of younger people are entering into those fields.

They were helping start a program to help younger people learn from the older, more experienced contractors. They were mentoring them. These more experienced men and women were there to walk alongside them and be their example.

We need that in our walk with Christ as well. We need people to come alongside us and help us learn how to navigate life as a follower of Jesus. How do we handle the tough situations that come up? How do we remain a faithful follower of Jesus in a world that increasingly hostile toward Christians?

One of my professors introduced me to the idea that although mentoring is probably best done face to face, it can also be done through reading. We can learn how to navigate life as a follower of Jesus by reading about those who have gone before us. That professor is the one who got me interested in reading what he affectionately referred to as ‘the dead guys’. Men and women who wrote about their experiences following Jesus with all the struggles and difficulties that went along with it. If we pay attention, we can learn from the stories of those who have gone before us almost as well as we can from those who we speak to face to face.

The author of Hebrews knew that well. He gave his readers a bit of a history lesson, but it was a history lesson with a point. We often call Hebrews 11 the Hall of Faith chapter of the Bible, because all the giants of the Jewish faith are listed there. The author wanted his readers to remember how many people had been a part of the heritage of their faith. He wanted them to remember the struggles they had been through. He particularly wanted them to remember the faithfulness of all these people even through their struggles.

In Hebrews 11 the author mentions Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, the Exodus, and Rahab. His purpose was not to tell the stories of all these people all over again, but to remind his readers of what these people went through and how they remained faithful through it all.

The author was writing to Hebrew Christians who were facing persecution in the first century just for being followers of Jesus. This list of people was meant to encourage them and give them the motivation to continue on. These people had faced trials and persecutions beyond what most of us will ever know: poverty, torture, flogging, and death by sword just to name a few.

These people went through all of that, and yet they continued to have faith. The first verse of Hebrews 11 gives us a definition of what faith is. **Hebrews 11:1 ESV — 1** Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Sometimes we get this idea about faith that it’s a shot in the dark. That having faith in something is a guess. That’s not the biblical idea of faith at all. The author of Hebrews uses the words assurance and conviction here to speak of our faith. Assurance is the Greek word ύπόστασις (hypostasis) which means something that can be authenticated, the foundation of trust. The word conviction here is the word έλεγχος (elenchos) which is the Greek word for proof or presenting evidence for something.

Both of these were legal terms that spoke of something that you could show to be factually true. So the definition of faith in the Bible has nothing to do with guessing or just hoping that it might happen one day. This kind of faith and trust is something that we can be sure of.

This is the key here. These people weren’t celebrated as heroes of the Israelites because they were superhuman and better than everybody else. The people in Hebrews 11 were celebrated as heroes because they had faith in God. That was the only thing that set them apart from everyone else.

They were people who had incredible faith in God. They trusted God to lead them where he wanted them to go. They had faith that no matter what, God knew what he was doing and they followed after him.

They were people who went through hard times, and they didn’t know what was coming for them. Abraham left the only home he had ever known in order to follow after God.

**Genesis 12:1 ESV — 1** Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

God told Abraham to leave, and he did. The amazing thing is that we have no record of any kind of objection or questioning from Abraham at all. Abraham simply trusted in God and left. That’s the kind of faith we’re talking about here. The kind of faith that trusts that God is going to take care of you no matter what. That God has a better plan for your life than you do.

Beth and I had to learn this the hard way. When I graduated college I assumed I would get a ministry position right away in my chosen field, and life would be good. I applied to dozens of different churches all across the nation. The answer was always either that they were looking for someone with more experience, or they had one candidate ahead of me. Needless to say, none of those jobs panned out.

Stupid me, that’s the point at which I started praying about what God wanted me to do. I had always assumed that I would get a graduate degree at some point, but I never thought I would do it right away. When I started to pray about it I couldn’t shake this idea that maybe that’s what I should do.

I made a few phone calls and within the space of an afternoon I had been accepted to Lincoln Christian Seminary, I had my old job lined up at the seed company I had worked at before, and we had a house to go look at to rent.

We made the trip to Lincoln, did all the paperwork necessary, and really liked the house we looked at. The only problem was that we were coming off my internship where I was making $75 a week and Addy was just about 3 months old. We had nothing in our bank account for rent, deposit, or moving expenses.

We got back home and waiting for us in the mailbox was a letter from Beth’s grandma. Inside was a check for exactly the amount we needed for rent and deposit for the house we looked at. Her grandma had no idea we were even thinking about moving to Lincoln. There was just a short note attached that said I was praying about you guys and God told me you needed this. We said, “Okay God, we’ll go to Lincoln.”

Most of the time we talk a good game about faith, but when the rubber hits the road, we want to be in control. We want to be the one to call the shots. How often do we say, honestly, God lead me where you want me to go, no matter where that might be.

We’re willing to live by faith as long as we don’t have to take a pay cut. We’re willing to live by faith as long as we don’t have to move away from family. We’re willing to live by faith as long as we don’t have to do something that makes us uncomfortable. We’re willing to live by faith as long as doing so fits in with our plan for our life. The problem is, that’s not what it means to live by faith. Faith that doesn’t let God take control is not true faith.

I had to learn to take a step of faith and trust that God would provide for me. And he has, every step of the way. I could tell you half a dozen stories of that same kind of provision, that same kind of leading in my life. Every time I try to take control and do things my way, things end up a mess. It has taken me several experiences like that to learn to trust God first with those kinds of decisions.

The author of Hebrews takes that same idea of faith, that assurance and conviction of what is true, and encourages his readers, and us, not to give up on trusting in God no matter what.

**Hebrews 12:1–2 ESV — 1** 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, **2** 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.

Here’s a general rule of Bible study. If you come across a ‘Therefore’ in Scripture, pay attention. That means you have come to the conclusion of a section of Scripture. There are a few different Greek words or phrases that are translated this way, but they all mean basically the same thing: for this reason, as a result, or because of this. When you see that, you are about to read the authors point. Everything in the section before or sometimes the entire previous portion of the book or letter, was all leading up to this.

That’s where we’re at in the book of Hebrews. In this case the author is looking back to Hebrews 11 with that list of all the folks throughout history who became heroes of the faith.

These were people who had been through awful struggles and sufferings and yet continued to have faith in God. The author of Hebrews wanted that to be an example and an inspiration to the Hebrew Christians he was writing to who were going through their own persecutions and sufferings. Remember they were facing opposition from the Roman Empire.

In our culture we are often alarmed to see the erosion of religious freedoms and the lack of tolerance of traditional Christian ideals and values. We might wonder what it’s going to be like to live as a Christian in our culture when those liberties are gone. What we have to remember is that those liberties were non-existent for the Christians of the first century.

They lived under an Empire that was hostile toward them and saw them as revolutionaries and troublemakers until Constantine and Licinius legalized the Christian religion in 313 AD. For 300 years Christians lived in a society that criminalized them for following Jesus. How did they do it? The key was they had a faith that endured through every hardship. In fact the church thrived during those years of persecution.

How do we do that today? How do we have a faith that endures through the hardships of life? How do you keep your faith going strong when you lose your job? How do you continue to have faith when you struggle with a chronic illness? How do you have a faith that endures when you lose a loved one?

The author of Hebrews uses a race metaphor to help us understand how we can do that. **Hebrews 12:1 ESV — 1** …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

When an athlete is about to enter into some kind of a race they do whatever they can to streamline themselves and keep themselves unencumbered. A big part of that is making sure they are physically up to the task. That they aren’t the one hindering themselves. In addition to that runners wear clothing that streamlines their body. Bicyclists wear aerodynamic helmets to help them take advantage of every bit air resistance they can shed. Swimmers shave all their body hair in order to gain an advantage in the water.

These athletes do whatever they can to throw off every weight as the author of Hebrews says here. That’s a Greek word that means something that hinders you or impedes you from doing something. Athletes know they have to get rid of everything that could slow them down and keep them from winning the final prize.

Ron Knickrehm is scheduled to hit the Appalachian trail anytime now. If anybody knows about throwing off the things that hinder you, it’s him. Backpackers pay a premium for equipment that might only be a few ounces lighter. They buy ultralight tents, sleeping bags, and pots to cook in. They cut the handles off their toothbrushes because it will save a fraction of an ounce.

They know that any extra weight that is not absolutely necessary will only slow them down and make their hike more difficult. A few extra ounces isn’t a big deal when your only going out for a few days. But when you’re about to hike all 2,181 miles from Georgia to Maine, every ounce is critical. You can ask Ron all about it in 6 months when he’s done.

The same thing is true of our faith. There are things that can hinder our faith and bring us down to the point that we don’t even want to continue anymore. The author of Hebrews mentions two things here that can bring us down. A weight that encumbers us or slows us down, and sin that so easily entangles us.

The weight that encumbers us could be anything that takes your focus away from your faith. It could be a job that you focus on more than your faith. Maybe you focus more on your hobbies than on your faith. Maybe what weighs you down and encumbers your faith is worry. Maybe it’s financial struggles or struggles with your children. The things that we allow to drag us down and get our attention focused elsewhere are the things the author of Hebrews is talking about here.

The sin that clings to us is even more serious than that. The word ‘cling’ means something that easily ensnares, something that controls us. This is not something that is easily avoided, it is something that besieges us. This kind of sin can infect every aspect of our life if we do not purge it and throw it off.

None of us are immune to sin that ensnares us. The Greek here has a definite article before the word sin, so this would actually read ‘**the** sin which so easily ensnares’. There is no wiggle room here. It’s not if sin happens to a problem for you then get rid of it. The author knows that every one of us will struggle with sin, and if we don’t win that battle, it will ensnare us and drag us down.

It’s also important to note that the author says every weight, every sin. That’s a Greek word that means every single one. We tend to cast off the weights and sins that are easy to cast off, but hold on to the ones that are difficult or that we actually don’t want to get rid of. That’s not how this works.

If you decide that you don’t want to cast off that weight because you want to carry it, or you want to continue in a particular sin because you actually enjoy it, then don’t expect to be able to have a faith that endures when hardships come. Ron could never hike all 2200 miles of the Appalachian Trail if he tried to take hundreds of pounds of equipment with him. That would hinder him from accomplishing his goal. The same thing is true of us. We cannot have a faith that endures if we continue to let our burdens and sin drag us down.

One of the best ways that we can have a faith that endures even in the midst of suffering and trials is to look to Jesus. **Hebrews 12:2–4 ESV — 2** 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. **3** Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. **4** In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

The author of Hebrews wanted to remind his audience that they are not suffering through something that no one has ever gone through before. They are not suffering through any more than Jesus did on our behalf. Jesus endured the torture of the cross. He shed his blood so that we could be redeemed. Very few people will ever suffer for their faith to that extent.

Recognize that he doesn’t say this to minimize the sufferings and trials these folks are going through. He wants them to put their sufferings in perspective with the sufferings of Jesus so that they will be inspired to endure just like Jesus did. If Jesus was faithful in all that he went through, then we can be faithful in what we go through, too.

In light of that he tells us… **Hebrews 12:12–14 ESV — 12** Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, **13** and make straight paths for your feet… **14** Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Have you ever done so much physical work that your arms and legs just turned to jello? We have a friend that owns some property down in Brown County with a small lake. Often times we’ll start a fire up on the dam in the evening and sit out by the lake. On one of our visits, just as we were about to leave, we saw some smoke coming from the dam, and we realized that the wind had caught a spark from the fire that hadn’t gotten put out and had ignited some of the grass.

By the time we grabbed some buckets and ran up the hill, the fire had spread to an area a little bigger than the platform here. There were three of us there that day. We began running down the dam to the water, filling up five gallon buckets, and dousing the fire the best we could. It took about 2 hours of the three of us constantly fighting the flames, but we finally got it all put out. We estimated that between the three of us we put somewhere between 600-800 gallons of water on the dam that day. When we were finally done, we walked down the hill, and all three of us just collapsed. I don’t think we moved for another half an hour. Between the adrenaline and all the physical labor we had just done, we were just completely exhausted.

Sometimes the trials and sufferings that we go through in our lives can wear us out so much that we feel like we just can’t go a step further. We feel like the weight of the burdens and the sin that we carry are just too much, and we can’t go on. When our hands droop and our knees are weak, we can’t just give up.

If the three of us had given up before the flames were completely out, before our goal was accomplished, we would have had a big problem on our hands. Our friends property is surrounded by Yellowwood State Forest, which is connected to Hoosier National Forest. Together those two forests are about 225,000 acres of forest. I could have been famous.

The stakes were too high to give up before the job was done. The stakes in the race we are in spiritually are much higher. If we give up the race, or if we quit because we are tired, then we will miss the greatest treasure of all eternity. If we begin to falter, we have to push on, we have to strengthen ourselves, we have to make sure we clear our path of the obstacles we face so that we will not fail to finish the race well and reach our goal.

Athletes who enter a race have a goal in mind. They want to be the one to win the race. They train and practice so they can come in first place. Thankfully as followers of Jesus, there is not only one person who can win this race. We are all called to run this race and finish well. We can all reach the goal that is set out before us.

**Hebrews 12:22–28 ESV — 22** But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, **23** and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, **24** and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. **…28** Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,

These verses might be a little confusing at first. What is all this about Mt. Zion? What exactly is he talking about here? Zion was an ancient name for the city of Jerusalem. We first see it in 2 Samuel 5 when David conquered the city and claimed it as the city of David. Later on, that name was used to speak not only of the city of Jerusalem, but also of the Temple, Judah, and the people of God, and God’s dwelling place.

Here in Hebrews, he calls it ‘the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem’. I want to connect us with two Scriptures here to give us an idea of what he’s talking about. The first, we looked at just a couple of weeks ago. In Hebrews 8, the author quoted Jeremiah 31, which speaks of the New Covenant that God would establish one day, which he did in Jesus.

**Hebrews 8:10–12 ESV — 10** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **11** And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. **12** For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

This is God’s dwelling place, where he won’t have to be separated from humanity by a curtain, but he will dwell with people as their God. Mt. Zion is God’s dwelling place. Revelation 21 gives us a still clearer picture of this idea.

**Revelation 21:1–5 ESV — 1** Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” **5** And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”…

That’s our goal, folks. One day God is going to recreate this world, and there will be a new Mt. Zion, a heavenly Jerusalem that is the dwelling place of God. And notice that we don’t go to it, to some heavenly place somewhere in the sky. This new Jerusalem, the city of the living God, comes down to us so that God can dwell with us. So he can be our God and we can be his people.

This is what we’re striving for. This is what we have to look forward to. This is why we have to have a faith that endures no matter what trials and sufferings we face in this life. Because we have something far greater, far better, far superior waiting for us if we will just continue to have faith in God.

The God we read about in the Bible is faithful. He never made a promise that he did not keep, and he never will. If we have a faith that endures, we will live with God for all eternity in the new Jerusalem. Keep striving toward that goal. Throw off the weights and the sin that hinder you. Keep up your strength, run the race set before you, and finish well. The prize is worth it, I can promise you that.