

The 22nd August 2004 was a dark day in Australian sporting history. The Aussie women's eight had made it to the final of the women's 2000 metre rowing event in the Athens Olympics.

And we were doing ok. We were running third. But with a quarter of the race still to go. Something happened. Or maybe I should say. Something stopped happening. Because just past the 1500 metre mark in the race. Sally Robbins lay back in her seat. And stopped rowing. While they dropped back to fourth, then fifth. They eventually crossed the line last. By about 8 eight seconds.

Apparently there were some pretty harsh words from the other girls. And later it came out. That *lay down Sally* had form. She'd done the same thing at the 2002 world championships. And she cost them an almost certain gold medal. So there was some concern that she might have problems at Athens. And apparently the words KEEP ROWING had been written on the back of the rower in front of her.

Now maybe it's not quite as bad as a certain underarm bowling incident. But quitting, is UN-AUSTRALIAN.

Now, in this letter to the Hebrews. There's been a lot of time spent talking about the person of Jesus and his ministry.

He's God's best ever spokesman. Better than the angels. Better than the prophets. He's the best ever leader and priest. He's the permanent, once for all HIGH PRIEST of the new covenant. So you might say Jesus and his ministry is the THEME of the letter. But here's point of the theme. Here's the central THRUST.

And we've seen it in bits along the way. It's to do with our response.

I'll take you to verse 36 there in chapter 10. This I think is the key verse in the whole letter. Talking to the Jewish Christians. He says.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of god, you will receive what he has promised.

Because Jesus is so great. Because of what he's done. There's a great reward waiting if you'll do what it takes to stick with him.

So you need to KEEP GOING. Like the heroes of the faith we'll get to in a minute.

Now it's clear that when it comes to your salvation. You don't have anything to offer. There's nothing you can contribute. Jesus is the only one that can MAKE THAT HAPPEN. That's clear.

So when it comes to salvation. Their's not CONTRIBUTION involved on your part. But there is a COST. And you need to make that distinction.

There's a cost in following Jesus. And that cost. Might be the thing that wears you down. That discourages you. That temps you to opt out. But you need to KEEP GOING.

If you just back up one verse from where we were before. Back to verse 35 it says.

Don't' throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

You need to persevere. Do God's will. Receive what's promised. And it's not long now.

For in just a little while. Jesus is coming back.

Now. I'm not sure if you got lost somewhere along the line in Hebrews. Maybe the stuff about Melchizedek you found hard. But there's a two word summary there in verse 26. Of what he's been saying. It's just sort of incidental. And the two words are THE TRUTH.

See he says there. If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of THE TRUTH, no sacrifice for sins is left.

It's THE TRUTH. Which has got it's embryonic stages way back at the start of the OT. It's the truth that God had in mind before the creation of the world. The truth that starts with God's promise. And finds it's fullest expression in Jesus.

But it's the kind of truth that makes an impact. It's a powerful, penetrating truth.

This truth. It's a bit like one of those great big ships they use to break up the ice. There's so much weight. So much force.

When the ship hits the ice. It breaks through. And divides. Something's gotta give. And the truth about Jesus...

It's like that. It's a polarizing truth. And you see it right through the bible as this truth develops.

As God's plans for his people unfold.

God's words which are truth. Force you one way or the other. You're either with Moses. Or you're not. And you face the consequences like Pharaoh.

Which explains in a way. I mean you wonder how a religion that teaches grace and forgiveness could be in the firing line so much. Why so many Christians have been killed for it.

But it's the nature of the truth it is.

There's a great reward on the one hand. But a serious consequence. A confronting consequence on the other. Which is what comes through here.

See there in verse 26.

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

They're harsh sounding words. But sometimes the nature of the truth means there needs to be serious warnings. Like high voltage signs around electricity.

And if you're not sure that's the real deal. All you have to do is look back to what happened in Moses' day. And see what happened to people who thought they could take it or leave it back then. Verse 28

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

And if you remember the comparisons. Between Moses and Jesus. Moses was faithful as a servant. But Jesus is a son over God's house.

Which heightens the offence.

Hebrews 10:29 ²⁹ How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot....

So if you receive the knowledge of the truth about Jesus. It's a fairly serious thing to reject it. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And I don't know if this helps. But sometimes you think. There's lots of really nice people who you'd think. Who seem pretty decent, who wouldn't have too many crimes against humanity. But who politely but firmly say no to what Jesus asks.

And you think. Why would God judge them? When they're basically decent people. And maybe that's you. But God seems to take it pretty seriously. And I think the charge sheet might read something like this. There in verse 29. It's to do with response to the truth.

Hebrews 10:29 ²⁹ How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

You might say well I don't think that deserves punishment at all. But God seems to take it pretty seriously.

That's just something to think about.

But the whole point of the letter. Is to say. Make sure that's not you.

The whole point is to say. Make no mistake. To reject God's truth. To reject God's Son. Is a serious thing. Is to invite God's judgment on yourself. But don't go there.

Verse 39.

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

So again. There's the two options laid out. And the rest of what's here. Chapter 11 and the end of chapter 10. Are just reminders of how other people persevered in the light of what God's promised.

Now, there's three lots of examples.

And you see there from verse 32 of chapter 10. He starts with the example of the Jewish Christians themselves. And then he takes us back to the Old Testament heroes. And then he finishes with Jesus himself.

So lets have a look at the first lot.

Hebrews 10:32-34 ³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

There's not much detail. But you get an idea when you read Acts. Prison, flogging, stoning.

That's their experience. They've got a first hand understanding of the cost of following Jesus.

Which is what they've got in common with the heroes of the faith in chapter 11.

... we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

What they share. Is the same faith.

Which according to verse 1 is about being sure of what you hope for.

And there's the list of the Old Testament hall of fame.

From Abel right through.

Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses.

Who put their faith into action in different ways.

Noah. Builds the ark. Abraham leaves his home and lives as a stranger in the promised land. There's a diverse list of actions. Based on the same faith.

But at the same time. It's also a diverse list of suffering. I mean it's Abel's blood that still speaks. Because it was spilled. Noah had to endure being the one righteous man in the whole world. Which made him a stranger on the planet just like Abraham in the land. And what about Moses' parents. Can you imagine the

angst of putting your new born baby in a basket and floating it out on the Brisbane River.

Moses himself stands up to the most powerful man in Egypt. With a stick. Daniel and his friends end up in lions dens and furnaces.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

There from verse 32

. ³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. ³⁷ They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them.

I mean how many different ways can you suffer?

How is this supposed to be encouraging me to persevere?

We're running a boot camp on the Christian basics next year. And I have to admit. I haven't included a section on enduring physical torture. Maybe I should.

Putting up with shame. Feeling like an alien.

Well I think there's a couple of ways you can look at it.

To start with. If you've suffered in some way for your faith. Then there's got to be someone in that lot you can identify with.

Maybe you haven't been sawn in two. But maybe there has been that isolation.

Maybe you've been jeered. Or felt like you would be if you owned up to your faith in Jesus. Maybe you've been mistreated. Or just left out. Like an alien.

Maybe you've taken a risk. Felt that fear that uncertainty. When you had the guts to talk to someone about your faith.

Maybe you've suffered financially. Because of your generosity.

Well whatever it is for you. There's a list of some others who've been there. And that's helpful.

To help you persevere. So you don't shrink back.

I mean there'd be nothing worse than hearing stories of people who breezed through with no struggles at all. Would there.

And if you've somehow convinced yourself that you can be the one Christian who'll fly through with no troubles. There's a reality check. That's also helpful.

There's plenty of people who've stopped pulling the oar, who've given up. Because they thought following Jesus was supposed to be nothing but blessings of health and happiness.

So it's that identification isn't it. If you're persevering. You're not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

You can identify with the struggle. And that's not to mention the examples in the last 2000 years. That's not to mention the William Carey. Missionary to India. That doesn't include watchman Lee in China. Or the people burned at the stake in England. That doesn't include the Christians persecuted and killed in Communist China. That's not including the people who've made all sorts of sacrifices for the gospel in the history of this church.

So there's that solidarity with those who've gone before you.

You share that side of things. But you also share the same perspective.

Verse 13 says. ¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

See if you're someone who's made any sort of sacrifice at all for the sake of Christ. Then you're showing the same motivation. You consider it worthwhile. Because you're looking to what God's promised too.

¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have

had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one.

You both consider the sacrifice worthwhile. Because of the city God's prepared.

So there's all those points of solidarity. That identification. To help you persevere.

But that's not all. It's not just so you can say. Well someone else has faced the same things so that's all I need.

It's not just so you can say. No matter how hard it is for you there's always someone else who's done it harder.

Which is what you hear people saying sometimes when someones doing it tough.

There's always someone worse off than you. That's cold comfort I reckon.

The big advantage of looking back. Isn't just to identify with their struggles. And its not just to be inspired by their great example.

See when you look back. You've got 20/20 vision.

And you can see the results. Was their faith vindicated?

Noah and his families' lives are saved. Because of their faith.

Would have perished if he'd stopped short.

Abraham and Sarah have a baby. Vindicated. Abraham has more descendants than you can count. Vindicated

Moses keeps the Passover. And he's vindicated. As the firstborn of the Egyptians meet their death.

Baby Moses lives.

Grown up Moses defeats Pharaoh.

The people pass through the Red Sea. The walls of Jericho fall. The ancient heroes of faith.

Tick tick tick tick tick.

The heroes of the faith encourage us to persevere. Because their faith is Vindicated.

If it wasn't this'd be the hall of fame losers of the faith. Examples of where NOT to put your faith.

In verse 1 of chapter 12 the writer says.

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.

Whatever that looks like for you. Because it's a bit different for everyone.

Now, you might take this as being like all those people who've gone before. And they're all cheering you on. You're running that last bit of the marathon. And

there's Moses. And there's Abraham and Rahab. And they're shouting at you to keep going. So you don't grow weary, or lose heart. Or get side-tracked.

But I don't think that's the main force of it.

See I don't think the cloud of witnesses are so much witness to the race YOU'RE RUNNING... as they are witnesses to God's faithfulness.

Remember. What's faith? It's being sure of what we hope for. It's being certain of what we don't see. And with every vindicated act of faith. You can be more sure. Of your hope. You can be more certain of what you can't see. Their witness takes away my excuses to not have faith.

So since we're surrounded by such a great mob of witnesses whose actions bear witness to God's faithfulness. Let's run the race like we mean business.

God's faithful. The reward's sure.

So here's a coverall statement. Whatever it is that's hindering you. Throw it off. Maybe it's some sort of distraction. Whatever it is. It's not worth clinging to.

By comparison with what God's got for you. Disentangle yourself from the sin that's just out to disqualify you.

And that brings us to the final example. Which is Jesus himself. Who's the ultimate proof of God's faithfulness.

Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, who's not just an example of faith. He's the author and perfecter. He's the reason every one of those people in the past. And Everyone in the future. Can have hope at all.

Who for the joy set before him. Endured the cross, scorning its shame.

Who sat down at the right hand of God. That's the third time so far we're told that fact. The job's done. The prize is bought and paid for.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

We don't know if the aussie womens 8 would have even medalled. If lay down sally had kept rowing.

But because of Jesus. For you and I. the reward is certain.

I'll read verse 36 chapter 10 one last time.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of god, you will receive what he has promised.