

# The extraordinary in the ordinary

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## FINISHING WELL

Today we come to the last in this series 'The extraordinary in the Ordinary', although in a way it's not the last! In the New Year we're going to leap into the letter to the Ephesians, a letter which speaks of God's love of the church. I am passionate about the church – my passion has been rekindled by this series – and the next. I am convinced that the local church is the hope of the world. Ephesians tells us that it is through the church that God primarily wants to make himself known. How important is the church to you?

This series – The Extraordinary in the Ordinary – has all been about the church. The community of the people of God becoming more and more the community that reflects who God is. It's been about how we live life together. So we've thought about our attitude, do we have the same 'whatever it takes' attitude Jesus had toward people? Does our priority match God's priority – that people matter? We've thought about being able to say 'you have no idea of the joy it brings me to do this' as we give our money. We've talked about humility – putting others first. We've talked about the power of words. We've talked about how we can help, support and encourage one another. We've talked about using our gifts and we've seen how God can take, what we think are ordinary thoughts, words, actions and gifts, and transform them in the life of a community. I want you to get excited about the church. So for two minutes I want you to talk to each other about what excites you about the church! Go!

Do you ever feel like giving up on the church? I do.... sometimes when it gets hard!

Hebrews 12 v 1-3 says this: 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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

You want a reason not to give up on church? Because Jesus didn't! Hebrews 12 v 3: "Consider Jesus who endured such opposition for sinners, so that you will not grow weary and give up." A "Whatever it takes!" attitude. Friends, he thought it was worth it – he went to the cross because of it...yes the church! Hebrews 11 is the great chapter in the Bible about faith. It lists loads of people who exercised great faith and who did not give up on what God had said! We think this

is a great chapter - we even know the stories of these people, and we often get great encouragement by reading this chapter. Well the first part anyway! But have you ever read the second part of Hebrews 11? Perhaps it's not quite so encouraging.

"...Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated - the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect." (Hebrews 11 v 35-39)

Oops – that doesn't make for great encouragement ... does it? For these people things did not turn out well and they never received what had been promised. Some of us feel we know what that's like - don't we? And we know the temptation to give up! Trouble is Hebrews 12 v 1 comes next. It begins "Therefore". Therefore means – "ok in the light of everything I have just said". So here the writer is saying – look in the light of all these examples of faith (some whose stories you know and can see the power of God really evident, but some of whom had it really tough and never got what was promised) in the light of this - don't give up! And in the light of the truth that Jesus himself didn't give up, friends, don't give up! Nowhere do we read that the Christian life or being part of church is easy.

Jesus went to the cross ... that's what he thinks of the church. He loves it because he loves it because he loves it. And you are part of the church - and he loves you because he loves you because he loves you. Whatever happens he will not give up on you – you are far too precious for that. And he won't give up on the church either – because it is the hope of the world. If we are to finish well, this ordinary community that can be transformed, then what do we need to do? Friends, we need to throw off everything that hinders us (Heb. 12 v 1).

How much do you really want to grow? Really? How much are you prepared to do 'whatever it takes?' What sin do you know you need to confront? Many, if not all of us, are afraid of throwing off everything that hinders, but that reveals what we really think about God. God is good ... yes? God can be trusted... yes? He knows us better than we know ourselves ... yes? He has gifted and equipped us...yes? He knows our capabilities and he knows when we are vulnerable, he knows what we need in all the stages of life. His plans for us are good. Wholehearted commitment to him will only be a good thing for us – it will not damage us, and yet we are so often reluctant to throw off everything that hinders. Friends we can help one another in this. This is where an ordinary community becomes an extraordinary community.

Friends we can invite people to help us finish well. Join a small group, invest in it, get to know others who will walk your journey with you, and if you get to a deep level of honesty – you will see the transforming power of relationships. You can have and develop trusted friends who you can be really truthful with, friends who will ask you the hard question and hold you accountable. I go regularly to someone to get help! I went this week. He helps me see the wood from the trees when I'm struggling to; he corrects my thinking about people; he challenges my assumptions, judgements and accusations.

I wonder how many of us carry burdens God never intended for us to carry because we are afraid to ask for help. Some of us go to the wrong places don't we – where we will not be challenged; where we will hear only what we want to hear; where we don't receive spiritual help. How seriously will we take this challenge to throw off everything that hinders? Neither I nor the church can fully reach its potential if we give up on this. Let's finish well and see the extraordinary in the ordinary and 'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us'.

Sometimes I feel like giving up on church. Sometimes it's to do with money - sometimes because I think of all the things I can't afford to do and I see others doing them. Sometimes it's because I worry financially about the future – I've been a fool and not done right by my family. Sometimes it's because the church doesn't change quickly enough and I get frustrated. Sometimes it's because I feel I'm always asking things of people who are already busy. Sometimes it's because I think everyone else has different priorities to me and however hard I try people don't seem to respond. Sometimes it's because I daren't think about what people must say about me – never to me – but to others and I don't think that's fair - I'm only doing what you asked me to do. Sometimes it's because it seems to me that nothing I do makes any difference – nothing ever really changes. Sometimes it's because I know who I really am and I feel a fraud. Sometimes it's because I just want a quiet life where I don't have to continually stick my neck out! I have to work hard to remember why I'm doing this and why church is so important, and I have to remind myself that the values of the Kingdom are not the values of the world, and that what matters in the Kingdom is what really matters. And I have to remind myself that choosing to follow Christ has its consequences. It will restrict my personal liberty to do and plan as I please. It will mean that some options are simply not open to me. I have to remind myself that God does not, and will not give up on me. And I have to choose to persevere and follow in the way of the Master.

How did Jesus persevere in the face of such opposition? Hebrew 12 v 2 says: '... who for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame'. What joy? The joy of making the Father known: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" Jesus said (John 14v9). Jesus prayed in John 17 – 'glorify your son that your son may glorify you; make me known so that I may make you known.' Jesus came to show the deepest desire in the heart of the Father - to keep the dream alive. Today, now, we can know the joy of keeping the dream alive, because we have the hope of the world in us, the truth about Christ.

And the joy of the highest personal achievement. Jesus perfectly understood he was called to go the cross; his final cry was 'it is finished!' (John 19 v 30). I did it – I gave my excellent best – I kept going to the end. Jesus endured the cross for the joy of knowing he had done his very best and that it was the only way to fulfil his Father's will.

And the joy of saving souls. "It is finished!" was a cry of joy. I did it – I have made it possible to keep my Father's dream alive - that they may know him even as I know him; that they may be known even as I am known. Because he persevered we are free – and that brings him great joy. As he hung there he said 'you have no idea of the joy it brings me to do this for you.' It is finished.

Friends – that same joy can be ours: the joy of making the love of God known; the joy of fulfilling our calling and achieving the highest possible; the joy of seeing others come to Christ. So friends let us finish well together. Let us get excited about the church. Let us throw off everything that hinders us and let us persevere, because we follow Jesus and we wait to share his joy. Let us see the extraordinary power of the loving God at work in this ordinary bunch of people.

Preached on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2007 in Crawley Baptist Church