

Hebrews 12: 1 and 2

Heroes. The Bible is full of them, full of examples of women and men of faith. Hebrews 11 lists many of them, from Abel till the prophets.

Who doesn't want to be a hero? We all want to be strong, brave and heroic. It is compelling to read about the faith of Sarah and the bravery of Moses. Reading about all they did by faith helps us to grow in our faith and to dream big. Unfortunately, when we look at the lives of the pioneers of our faith, there's another side to the coin. The heroes of the big screen normally survive their actions and live happily ever after. The Bible is totally different. Chapter 11 starts with the heroic, with how those Old Testament heroes conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, stopped the mouth of the lions, escaped the edge of the sword and lived by faith. The chapter then continues with the other side of the coin. Some of the heroes of the faith were tortured, mocked, flogged, imprisoned and even sawn in two and killed by the sword. There is not always a happy ending for the kingdom heroes. Many of them found faith and strength in adversity. But all of them finished well, by the grace of God.

Being surrounded by this so-called 'cloud of witnesses', we are in chapter 12 encouraged to look to Jesus. He is the real Superhero. And not surprisingly, the lives of the men and women of the Old Testament time reflected (or better: foreshadowed) His life. They had faith in good and in bad times. The same goes for the Lord Jesus Christ: He endured the cross, despised the shame and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, says Hebrews 12.2. Jesus did not only cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead, and share his wisdom. In His life, you see the other side of the coin as well.

He was mocked and flogged and crucified with criminals on his left and right side. Church father Cyril, who was bishop of Jerusalem after the year 350, says that all this is part of who Jesus is, it is part of his nature. He says: 'In general, all things are twofold in our Lord Jesus Christ. His birth is twofold [...], his descent is twofold, one lowly and a second, his manifest coming, which is yet to be. In his first coming he was wrapped in swaddling clothes in the manger, in his second he will be robed in light as with a cloak. In the first coming, he "endured the cross, despising the shame"; in the second he will come in glory..'

Apparently, this two-fold life of the heroes of the faith, together with the twofold life of our Lord Jesus, is part of the experience of a believer. We can relate to that. There are ups and downs in our lives. What catches our

attention, however, is that the heroes are seemingly so perfect. We read about the lives of the heroes and how they either conquer or are conquered, but they all endure till the end by faith. We don't read here about their struggle with sin and Satan and the world. They seem to be detached from the reality of this world. That perspective is only on hindsight, though. In reality, all our heroes struggled with sin. Take the example of Abraham, he first obeyed God when the Lord told him to leave everything and 'go.' But when things got difficult, he went to Egypt without consulting the Lord and out of fear he even gave his beautiful wife over to the mercies of the Pharaoh, rather than protecting her. Our heroes are mere human beings. That is why Hebrews 12 starts with the encouragement *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.*

So it does say that things weigh on us, and that sin is like a parasite, clinging on us. That was the same for all the heroes of faith. They lived in this world, in the same reality as we do, and they had to live with a certain outlook, with a new perspective in order to be able to survive. The author of Hebrews calls that perspective 'faith.'

Living by faith is not something that comes easily. Here in the West, we live in a society where faith in God is marginalized. We live in a so-called secular society. We hear saddening stories around us of children that do not believe anymore, of churches that are downsized in numbers and many times closed. The narrative of an empty church and of irrelevant faith can easily become the leading narrative, also for churchgoers.

During the holidays I read a book about that topic. It is written by a Dutch professor in Secularization studies (Herman Paul) and is called 'The battle for the heart' and has as subtitle 'the secularization of desire.' Herman says that we should boycott the negative narrative. It is not true that everything around us is declining. Think about the many tens of thousands of Christian immigrants who came to the Netherlands and started their own churches.

Herman Paul says: we should stop telling the negative narrative. But more important, he indicates that we as a church need to change. Hence the subtitle: secularization of desire. The process of leaving the faith and ultimately leaving the church starts in our hearts, with wrongful desires. We as believers tend to have the same focus the world has. We focus on

wealth, on health, on success, on outer beauty, and by doing that, we let the world into our hearts.

First our hearts become worldly, while still being part of the church. At the end, we leave the church entirely, which is only an outer confirmation of what already happened on the inside.

What does Hebrews has to say about that? The writer re-directs our focus. He compares our lives with a race. We as believers are like athletes. The only way to be an athlete, is to focus. To strip down and lay aside everything that hinders us. And focus. And our focus is on Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Superhero. He is the only one of all the heroes without sin. He is God with us. We run the race of faith by keeping our eyes upon Jesus.

Looking at Jesus helps us to transform our desire. Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame, with as main reason: the joy that was set before him. He suffered and died for us, so that we by faith in Him can live. He was stripped naked and despised the shame for us, as He knew that by doing this, He would clothe us with love and justice. The joy that was set before Him are we, believers. Jesus endured the cross in anticipation of the joy of being our Savior would bring him. The everlasting joy of being our eternal Savior drove Jesus to endure the cross.

How does this help us in our Christian lives? Because we will still have are ups and downs. Let me share two very opposing experiences I can have. Every so often, the devil knocks on the door of my heart. 'I am not at home', I respond. 'Yes, you are', he says, 'and I have an enticing offer for you.' 'You will like this one.' And I respond 'Well, you are right, I am at home, but I have someone else who is the boss here, my big Brother. He will open the door, let me call him!' And I call Jesus. Whenever I am in distress and call Jesus, He is right there. And the devil always takes off as soon as he hears his Name.

The opposite experience can happen when for example I'm scrolling through Marktplaats/E-bay and see something which I don't need and could live without. Still I step in my car and take off. A voice in my heart says: 'Do you really need it?' And I respond 'Not really, but taking a look doesn't do any harm.' And I drive off and end up buying it. Later I can regret it and say: 'Maybe I did not need it after all.' So sometimes I just do what I want, without consulting the Lord or listening to his voice.

We all have similar experiences. And it is tempting to make up the balance and say: one thing went well, but I also decided at one point to just do

something without consulting the Lord. We are tempted to think that the better we perform the more divine grace and love enters in our lives. In fact, our spiritual ups and downs are not the focus. Hebrews says: let your life not be hindered by anything, focus on Jesus. Focus on the grace that is revealed in Jesus. Confess your sins. Live by faith. Put your trust in the Lord, and in the sacrifice of Jesus. His blood washes you from all sin. Hebrews calls us to re-direct our desires. Following Jesus and growing spiritually is to strip down and lay aside everything that hinders us. After all, running the race of faith is for athletes. The word Gymnastics comes from the Greek 'Gymnos', which means 'naked.' Running without clothes helped the athletes to be as fast as possible. That means running the race we must abandon that which gives us false security (even our own good deeds) and move toward trusting Jesus as Lord. He wants to be the joy of our lives and the desire of our hearts. Trusting Him means not being in control but letting Jesus reign. It means letting Him oversee our lives, it means not letting our hearts be filled with worldly desires. We have all those pioneers of the faith cheering us on. They encourage us to not being in control of our own lives, but to have faith, to trust God, to start running and to never quit. Hebrews helps us to run without spiritual fat and to keep our eyes upon Jesus, our Savior, who both began and finished the race we are in. Jesus never lost sight of where he was heading. He had eternal joy before him. And so do we. Every day, we can start afresh. Every day we lay down everything that weighs us down, and focus on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. Our lives will have ups and downs. We may conquer. We may be conquered. We may even -just as many of our brothers and sisters do throughout the world- loose our lives. Still, we will certainly endure, if only we trust the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. He is the Perfecter of our faith and He will help us to reach the finish. Just as Jesus life was twofold and ended with glory, also our lives will end in His glory. Imagine the joy we'll have when we discover that the finish is nothing but a fabulous start of being with the triune God and experiencing eternal joy, together with all the saints and angels and archangels.

Amen.