

The Summer Games of the 28<sup>th</sup> Olympiad are into their second week in Athens, Greece having returned to the land of their beginning. The first Olympics were held in 776 BC in Olympia and subsequently every four years until they were suspended in AD 393 for just more than 1,500 years. In 1896 the Olympics were held again, marking the birth of the modern era and Athens played host 108 years ago.

I watched some of the opening ceremonies last Friday evening and was moved by what the narrator on NBC said in his narration, leading up to the grand moment of the opening ceremony. He made the observation that all of these athletes are “inspired by the memory of what once was.” What a wonderful observation and how true it is – for those athletes gathered in Athens and for us gathered here in The Worship Center. “Inspired by the memory of what once was” describes those who have chosen to live a life-style of faith. We, the people of God, the church, are “inspired by the memory of what once was.” In no place do we see this more in scripture than in the text before us today.

Hebrews 11 is profoundly packed with many memories and these memories of a time past do inspire us to what I sense to be an Olympian style faith. Think about these faithful ancestors whose faith was Olympian indeed. Consider some of the inspiring moments of faith articulated in Hebrews 11.

The author of this powerful text, probably Apollos, was well versed with the Old Testament and Jewish history. He alluded to people and events mentioned in Exodus, Joshua, Kings, the prophets, and stories not recorded in the Old Testament, suggesting these ancestors were faithful and did things by faith. He certainly was inspired by the memory of what once was. Commitment and sacrifice are written all over this text. There really is an inspiring memory of what once was.

The words I read remind us that it was faith that caused Moses to keep the Passover and enabled the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea, take down the walls of Jericho, conquer kingdoms, administer justice, obtain promises, shut the mouths of lions, quench raging fires, escape the edge of the sword, and put foreign armies to flight. Faith was especially evident in the lives of people who were tortured, mocked, flogged, chained, and imprisoned. It was evident in folks who were stoned to death, sawn in two, and killed by the sword. Faith sustained the Lord’s people when they were destitute, persecuted, and tortured. And ultimately faith set the stage for God’s greatest work in all of history in the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.

It is the inspiration of those memories that enables us to live an Olympian style faith ourselves. Those memories enable us to heed the call to come to a starting line and run with the saints, preserving when the road is bumpy, when our souls are quenched, when life doesn’t go as we expect. We are to have an Olympian style faith and we can as we consider and benefit from the testimonies of our pre-Christ ancestors. The daring vitality of their faith inspires us as we exert ourselves in the race prescribed for us.

It is this kind of faith that leads us to do what we think impossible, especially when we may be under duress. Verse 35b has always been intriguing to me. ***“But others were tortured, after refusing to accept the offered release in order that they might attain a better resurrection.”*** I looked for a reference to such a statement in the Old Testament, but couldn’t find one. I did, however, discover the historic events to which Apollos referred.<sup>1</sup> There were two. Both happened sometime between 167 BC and 165 BC. It was a dark time when the Greek Empire, under the domination of a King named Antiochus, enslaved our Hebrews ancestors. Consider the first, involving an elderly man in his nineties who was a priest, Eleazar.

“One day some men forced Eleazar’s mouth open and tried to make him eat the meat of a pig. Eleazar chose to die with honor rather than to live with shame. So he willingly walked to the place of torture, spitting out the meat as he went. This is a fine example of courage for everyone who is willing to refuse unclean food, even if it means death. The men in charge of the lawless sacrifice had known Eleazar

for a long time. So they took him aside and said to him in private: Get some meat that your religion says can be eaten. Then pretend you are eating meat from the pig that the king ordered us to sacrifice. Do this, and you won't be killed. We have been friends for a long time, so let us do this favor for you. But Eleazar did the only honorable thing that a man of his age and reputation could do. He firmly made up his mind to obey God's Law, just as he had always done. And so he immediately said: Kill me here and now! It would be disgraceful for someone my age to pretend to eat unlawful food. Our young people would think that I had given up my Jewish faith after ninety years. I might live a little longer, but I would cause our young people to deny their faith, and I would end up a shameful, disgusting old man. I might escape torture at the hands of humans for now, but even when I am dead, I cannot escape from God All-Powerful! By dying bravely I can prove that I was worthy of the long life that God has given me. And my death will set a good example for our young people—it will show them that we should not be afraid to die for our sacred laws. When Eleazar had finished speaking, he walked straight to the place of torture. But the same men who had earlier been kind to him now sneered, because they thought he was talking nonsense. When Eleazar had been beaten almost to the point of death, he groaned and shouted, "The Lord God knows everything! He knows that I could have escaped this terrible torture and death, but I have gladly suffered for him, because I honor him with all my heart and soul." Eleazar's brave and honorable death set an example for our whole nation, and especially for our young people."<sup>2</sup>

Now consider the second story involving our ancestors during this horrific time.

"King Antiochus once arrested seven Jewish brothers and their mother. He had them beaten with heavy whips and tried to make them eat the meat of pigs, which is against our laws. But one of the brothers spoke up and said, "Why are you torturing us like this? We will die before we disobey the laws of our ancestors!" This made the king so angry that he ordered his men to heat up big pots and pans, and they quickly did this. Meanwhile, the king forced the boy's family to watch him being tortured. Some soldiers cut out his tongue, then scalped him and chopped off his hands and feet, making him completely helpless. While the boy was still alive, the king told his soldiers, "Carry him to one of the big pans on the fire and fry him." When smoke from the pan started spreading everywhere, the brothers and their mother each said, "Let's die bravely! The Lord God will have pity on us, because he always takes care of his servants, just as Moses said in the song he wrote to correct our rebellious ancestors."

When the first brother was dead, the soldiers grabbed the second brother. They made fun of him and scalped him. Then they asked, "Wouldn't you rather eat some meat from a pig than to be slowly tortured to death?" In his native language the boy replied, "No!" Then the soldiers tortured him, just as they had done to the first brother. When the second brother was almost dead, he said to the king, "How can you be so cruel? Even if you kill us, the King of this world will raise us to life. And then we will live forever, because we died, rather than deny our faith."

When he died, they started torturing the third brother and shouted, "Stick out your tongue!". He immediately obeyed and bravely stretched out his arms as well. He had a lot of courage and said, "God in heaven gave these to me. But I will give them up to obey his laws, because I know God will give them back."

The king and his troops were amazed at the young man's courage. Here was someone willing to suffer. After he was dead, the king's troops beat and tortured the fourth brother in the same way. But just before he died, he told them, "God has promised to raise us to life! And so we are willing to die, but you have no hope for life after death."

As the fifth brother was being tortured, he looked straight at the king and said, "You order people around and make them obey you. But someday you will die. Don't think God has turned his back on our nation. Just wait! God will use his mighty power to make you and your family suffer." Next, they tortured the sixth brother. He was almost dead when he told the men, "Don't fool yourselves! We're suffering all these terrible things because we have disobeyed our God. Now you're fighting against God, so don't think that you won't be punished too."

The mother of these young men was a wonderful woman, and she deserves to be remembered with praise. She saw all seven of her sons die on the same day, but she was brave and never stopped trusting the Lord. She was a very special person, and with the feelings of a woman and the courage of a man, she encouraged each of her sons by telling them in their native language:

My son, I don't understand how you grew inside me. I am not the one who gave you life and breath or shaped your bodies. You are sacrificing your life to obey the laws of the God who created this world and all of its people. But God will be merciful and give life and breath back to you.

From the way the mother was talking, King Antiochus could tell that she was insulting him and sneering at him. The youngest son was still alive. So Antiochus made all kinds of promises to the boy and tried to make him change his mind. He said, "If you will forget about the teachings of your ancestors, I will make you rich and respected. You will be one of my trusted friends and a government official." When the boy refused to listen, the king turned to the mother, urging her to make the boy change his mind. Finally, she agreed and leaned toward her son. She spoke in her native language and mocked the cruel king:

My son, have pity on me! Even before you were born, you grew inside my body for nine months. Then I nursed you at my breast for three years. And until this very day, I have looked after you and taken care of you. Now, I beg you to look at the heavens and the earth and think about what you see. God made all of this out of nothing, and he made us humans in the same way. Don't be afraid of this butcher! Die willingly and show that you are just like your brothers. Then God will have pity and give you back to me on the day he gives me your brothers. While the mother was still speaking, the boy said to the king:

What are you waiting for? I'm not going to obey your orders! I only obey God's teachings that Moses gave to our ancestors. You have caused terrible troubles for our people, but you won't escape the punishment God will send on you. We have disobeyed God and made him angry with us. So for a little while the living Lord is letting us suffer because he wants to correct us and teach us to do right. But we are still his servants, and he will soon forgive us. King Antiochus, you're the most disgusting and godless creature that ever lived. Stop acting so high and mighty, and stop making foolish promises to yourself as you torture God's people. You will never escape God All-Powerful! He sees everything and will punish you. My brothers stayed faithful to our sacred agreement with God. So for a little while they had to suffer. Now, however, they have drunk the water that gives eternal life. But because of your pride, God will judge you and punish you as you deserve. I am willing to die along with my brothers for the laws of our ancestors. Meanwhile, I pray that God will soon forgive our people and show us mercy. I also pray that he will punish you so severely that you will finally confess that the Lord alone is God. God All-Powerful was right to be angry with our whole nation. But I pray that his anger will end with the sufferings that my brothers and I are going through.

When Antiochus realized that the boy was mocking him, he became more furious than ever and tortured him worse than the others. So the boy died, completely trusting the Lord and still faithful to his beliefs. Last of all, the king put their mother to death."<sup>3</sup>

Hard to believe, isn't it? But both of these events really happened. These stories demonstrate the ability of faith to sustain a resilient spirit in one's life even while being subjected to dehumanizing abuse. Faith proves to be the source of endurance in suffering and of moral courage in the face of death. It is an Olympian style faith. That kind of faith calls for sacrifice like that of those from a time long gone. It calls for unwavering commitment to the Lordship of God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Until you and I sacrifice, commit, and maintain a devotion to biblical principles, we'll never honor the memory of Moses, the Hebrews, Gideon, Samson, the Prophets, Eleazar, those Seven Brothers and their awe-inspiring Mother. We'll certainly not honor the example of those whose lives were ordered by a faith of gigantic proportions.

I emailed a prayer to the entering college freshman from Tabernacle on Friday. They and their parents have been on my mind and in my heart this past week. They were freshman in high school when I became their pastor. I have to confess I miss them. Maybe my missing them is sort of an "anticipatory

missing” since this time next year, Emily will be at college. This is the prayer I wrote and prayed for them:

“Gracious God, revealed in Jesus Christ and made known through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, I humbly ask You to grant Your favor in the lives of these precious young souls, whom I am honored to know and love.

As their journeys in college begin, may they know the closeness of Your company as they fine-tune their lives while settling into a different locale, away from the shelter of home. Sustain them whenever they are afflicted with moments of homesickness. Let them know that it is acceptable to yearn for home - mom, dad, siblings, extended family, friends, school, church, each other. May they realize in those moments that we, back home, long for them also.

By the same token, permit them to recognize that it’s all right not to be homesick. But when and if they are, bring healing grace as they look back with smiling contentment, knowing those who loved them even before they were born will always love them.

Guide them as they launch additional relationships that will, perhaps, impact them for the rest of their lives. Perchance a spouse, a partner in business, a best man, a groomsman, a maid or matron of honor, a bridesmaid, a friend for life will be met. Who knows? You of course.

As these, my dear young sisters and brothers in Christ, walk down a new road inspire them to be more than they are. Overwhelm them with a sense of Your nearness, calling each of them by name to grow in faith, hope, and love. Keep them and their families close to You and may they and their families keep You close to them.

This I pray for them and me to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Amen.”

I don’t know if they’ll get homesick or not. From time to time, they will I’m sure. As they have begun a new venture down a long, challenging, and unknown, yet beautiful road, I have a hunch they’ll allow the memory of what once was to inspire them to celebrate and look forward to what will be. So it should be with us. You see it is about the long haul.

And speaking of long hauls, you know what event is on NBC right now, even as I preach, don’t you? Of course you do. The Women’s Marathon. This time next Sunday the Men’s Marathon will be telecast. I love the track and field events. My favorite is The Marathon. I always look forward to that event more than any of the others. Those gals and guys who run that thing are always inspiring and in generations to come the memory of their endurance will inspire others. 26.2 miles is a long way to run. I’ve done a few half-marathons and I have to tell you, 13.1 miles is a long way too. The Marathon’s distance was chosen to duplicate the distance run by a Greek soldier from the town of Marathon to Athens in 490 BC to bring the news of a Greek victory over the Persians.

When the modern Olympics revived in 1896, a long race was part of the events known as The Marathon. Until 1908, it was 26 miles long. At the 1908 Olympic games in London, The Marathon was increased by 385 yards or two-tenths of a mile, which was the distance from the royal castle at Windsor to the Olympic stadium. The reason for increasing the distance was so the race could end in front of King Edward VII’s royal box. It’s been 26.2 miles ever since. Some of the runners commented after the race, “The twenty-six miles were not a problem. Those 385 yards, though, were a killer!” The whole thing can be a killer if one isn’t careful.

The NBC narrator said it well on the opening evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> Olympiad. Those athletes are “inspired by the memory of what once was.” Then, near the end of his narration, he offered these words: “A call to a starting line remains.” For you and me, who are believers in Jesus Christ, it is a call to an Olympian style faith. The One who is extending the call remains faithful. The Lord Jesus sweetly calls

us to the starting line daily, inviting us to listen for the cheers of countless saints whose faith finally became sight. He also calls us to consider the way that faithful “host of witnesses” lived and follow their examples. And He calls us to affix our gaze intently on Him, great Champion in the exercise of faith that He is. Listen as He says, “You can do it! You can do it! You can have an Olympian style faith!”

Inspired by the memory of what once was. I hope you are. That’s the key to an Olympian style faith. The call to a starting line has been extended, is being extended, and will continue to be extended until Jesus returns. So what are you waiting for?

**Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
Tabernacle Baptist Church  
Carrollton, Georgia**

**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from a translation by William L. Lane. Dr. Lane was my Undergraduate Advisor and one of my New Testament Professors while I was a student at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY where he taught. His faith became my sight in 1998.**

---

<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, “Hebrews 9-13” Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 47<sub>B</sub> (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> From 2 Maccabees 6:18-31 in The Jewish Apocrypha, translated in the *Contemporary English Version*, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> From 2 Maccabees 7:1-41.