

Hebrews 11:23

Faith is setting our hearts on our ultimate desire with determination

Pain is temporary, pride is forever.

I loved the Olympics. I found it exhilarating to see what the human body could do. And deeply moving watching athlete after athlete weeping on the podium. You had a sense that all the pent up emotion of years was flowing. The pain of early morning runs. The privations of a careful diet. The sacrifices that others had made. It was all worth it.

And I couldn't help remembering that the Apostle Paul used athletic, and even Olympic metaphors to describe the Christian life. Calling us to be in training, to run the race, to strive for the prize.

Actually I found myself thinking this week that if there had been a Paralympics Paul might have used that as his image. Because the Bible does not exalt the most gifted people but the most dedicated. There is a recognition that we are all damaged in one way or another, all impaired, with different strengths and weaknesses. The applause of heaven is not reserved for simple achievement, but for those who do the most with their gifts and circumstances.

Disconcertingly it seems that there is no place in heaven but the podium – there are lots of podiums for those who ran their race as they were able. But those who don't run the race identify themselves as people without faith in Christ, without a desire for the ultimate prize, and therefore without the hope of that prize.

Faith is, as we put it in the sermon title, "Going for Gold."

That is what we are going to be thinking about as we see what the writer to the Hebrews says about Moses. We have been looking at Hebrews 11 asking the question "so what is faith?"

We saw first of all that faith at its most basic level is faculty that everyone has to exercise all of the time. We all have to exercise reasonable trust in things we cannot see – especially things in the future. Christian faith is no more than that. We cannot see what goes on beyond the visible world – we simply have to trust God's word about it. We cannot see the future, we simply have to trust. But it is a reasonable trust. It is based on the evidence of what we can see, especially what has happened in history. Do listen to the first sermon if you want to consider this more.

Then we focused on Abraham. The issue that is picked out in Abraham's life is trust. Who can you trust? And we saw that Abraham's whole life was about learning to distrust the false promises of his world, - he walked away from the great city of Ur - and to trust the promises of God – he camped in the unpromising Promised Land. Ultimately he learned to trust that God gives resurrection life and he placed all the weight of his future hopes on that great promise. And he was not disappointed. His trust was vindicated.

And so to our next great hero of the faith – Moses. Moses who led God's people out of slavery in Egypt. Here another aspect of Christian faith comes to the fore. It is not just about who we trust, but what we long for.

In order to unpack what our author is saying I want to ask three questions about Moses.

1. What was in Moses' heart?
2. What qualities of character did he require?

3. What did his faith achieve? – *won't do this!!*

Firstly then

➤ **What was in Moses' heart?**

Verse 26 is central in this description of Moses.

 **Hebrews 11:26**

What is being alluded to was actually a bit of a false start in Moses' career, but it showed the beginnings of real faith. Moses had been born in slavery in Egypt as a Hebrew – one of the people of God – but because at that time Pharaoh had decreed that all such boys should be killed his mother had tricked Pharaoh's daughter into adopting him so that he grew up in Pharaoh's palace.

He had it made. He had a greater fortune than the Money Supermarket man. He had more status than Prince Harry – and no danger of embarrassing photos. He was more attractive to girls even than a teenager wearing Lynx – if you can imagine that.

And he gave it all up. He felt called to lead his people. Initially he fancied himself as Che Guevara – murdering an Egyptian – and that all went badly wrong, but finally God did make him into a godly leader of his people and he did lead them out of captivity and all because of what was in his heart. He longed for something more than 'all the treasures of Egypt'.

I say 'what was in his heart' and I want to clarify that a little. As modern people we tend to think of our hearts as the source, just of our emotions. So a middle aged man may know that is madness to have an affair with his secretary but his desire is uncontrollable and he does. He tells himself "my heart made me do it."

In the Bible the heart is not just the seat of our emotions. Sometimes in the bible people are described as "thinking" in their hearts. So the English idea of head – the place where we think – and heart – the place where we feel does not quite work when we read the bible. In the Bible our heart is the core of who we are. It is where everything about us comes together. It is the summation of our core emotions, and our core understanding, and our core will. And it is in that sense that I want to talk about Moses' heart.

Deep in Moses' heart he had done some careful reckoning. In verse 26 there is the word "regarded". That has the sense of a forming a careful judgment, in particular a judgement about value and esteem. He settled deep in himself a judgment about what he longed for.

Two judgements actually.

One about simple value.

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Disgrace was worth it. It was more valuable than the treasures of Egypt.

Perhaps we are to contemplate the fabulous wealth of Egypt. And of course the fabulous wealth of our culture even in this economic climate. You could devote yourself heart and soul to accumulating as much wealth as you can. You could – but you would be investing in chaff. You would be building a gilded cage.

But I think that the main thing our author wants us to think about is status. Moses chose disgrace. Most of you know I used to be a vet. Go to social gatherings and announce that you are a vet and there is interest and respect. Then I became a pastor – not even a

proper vicar – as pastor. Mention that and you see people rewind their conversation of the last five minutes to check they didn't blaspheme. They perhaps manage a few polite questions but underneath is the big question – Why?

Malcolm Muggeridge a television celebrity of yesteryear came to faith later in life and wrote about it in a book he called "A Chronicle of Wasted Time." He wrote this:

I may I suppose regard myself, or pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets - that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue - that's success. Furnished with fame and a little money, even the elderly, if they care to may partake of trendy diversions - that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time - that's fulfilment. Yet I say to you - and I beg you to believe me - multiply those tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment - measured against one draft of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.

Moses made a reckoning about the value of his high status wealthy life and he said "no – I am going for something better."

And he also made a reckoning about its permanence.

 **Hebrews 11:25**

You what they say about over indulgence with food: One moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.

Well it applies to sin too. Sin is pleasurable. Whether we are talking about sinful sex, or sinful obsession with wealth and status, or even sinful anger. There is sweetness about it which is as addictive as sugar. But it rots, it ruins, it kills.

In the short term there is always greater pain in avoiding sin than in yielding to it. But as that Olympics trailer said – Pain is temporary. As the apostle would have said – the prize is forever.

Do you reckon that in the core of your being? In your heart?

Perhaps you know you are addicted to the fleeting pleasures of sin. Pornography stands out as that in our culture. A brief pleasure that degrades us at the deepest level because it degrades true relationships. Talk to someone about it.

Perhaps for you it is the next purchase, or the next night out, or the next qualification, or the next promotion at work, or the next house. It won't be long before the only home you need is a six foot box, the only piece of paper that counts will be a certificate of your death, and the only promotion that you will care about is your promotion into the presence of God. The only demotion you will fear is demotion into outer darkness. Do you reckon that deep in your heart? Does it change your behaviour? What do you long for?

And are you prepared to endure that loss of status for Christ? I think that is what stops us talking about our faith. If there is one thing we don't want it is disgrace. It's being labelled as a God-botherer, or a faith-head, or a fundamentalist, or a fool. We are running a Christianity Explored course in October – will you mention it when the time comes reckoning that disgrace for the sake of Christ is worth it?

Or perhaps for you it is big, as it has been for me at some points in my life. Will you come to follow Christ, reckoning that all other pleasures are fleeting, reckoning that

disgrace for Christ is worth it? We are going to have at least one baptism in the next few weeks – will you make that step?

Perhaps God is calling you to take a big risk for him – even perhaps stepping into some form of gospel ministry. Will you consider that it is better to take that risk even if it all goes pear shaped and the whole world thinks you are a fool, than to ignore the call of God.

What is in your heart?

And then much more briefly what qualities of character did Moses need?

➤ ***What qualities of character did Moses need?***

Firstly there is self denial.

 **Hebrews 11:24**

It has been implicit in everything we have said but let me say it clearly. If your motto is the same as Oscar Wild's who said "I can resist everything except temptation" then you are ruined.

Self-denial is not masochistic torture it is enlightened self-interest. As Jesus said

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?¹

And then Moses needed courage.

 **Hebrews 11:27a**

Actually the first time Moses left Egypt he did flee in fear. But with God there are second chances and when he finally came back and faced Pharaoh he marched out defenceless in full view of Pharaoh's armies – but he knew that there are far greater things to fear than the ferocious murderous anger of the world's most powerful tyrant.

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. ⁵ But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him."²

Emily Bronte wrote:

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the worlds storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heavens glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

And he needed perseverance.

 **Hebrews 11:27b**

That word may have a sense of keeping our eyes on the goal.

It is not how you start out in your faith that God cares about – it is how you finish. In my 30 years of faith I have seen great ones brought low, and I have seen unimpressive and

¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Lk 9:23–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Lk 12:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

overlooked people slowly through a lifetime of obedience become men and women of incredible stature.

One of the tragedies of middle age is the number of people you see strewn around you who were once really serving God and now are nowhere. Is that you? Could that be you?

I am really serious about this. We have some fine Christian examples here and more widely in our culture, but it seems to me that we also have far too many believers who deep in their hearts do treasure God and Christ – they just lack the character to do much about it. At a simple day to day level they can't deny themselves a bit of sleep to get up and pray and read their bible. They just don't have the courage to take a real risk for Christ. And their eyes stray towards a thousand other goals, rather than day after day, week after week, year after year fixing their gaze on the only prize that matters.

Be different! What lasts longer? The pain of living for Christ or the regret of failing to? We need a generation of Moseses. Who have hearts that long for eternal treasure and characters that can put that longing into practice. As I prepared for this I imagined you all crowded onto one heavenly Paralympic podium. Like them we are a pretty motley crew – with some pretty dramatic disabilities. But there are angels applauding and we are waving. And in every eye there is a tear because we summoned up the character to live by the faith of Moses.

 **Hebrews 11:26**