

Jesus' Present Ministry
Implications for Our Perseverance

In his book *Disappointment with God* Philip Yancey tells about a young man named Richard who called him up out of the blue and introduced himself. He asked if Yancey would read a manuscript he'd written on the book of Job. [Job is about a man who experienced the loss of his children, his wealth, and his health even though he was righteous. In other words Job suffered innocently. Yet he remained faithful to God.] Yancey read the manuscript, appreciated it, and even wrote a forward when the manuscript was reshaped into a book.

But six months later, Richard visited Yancey because he needed to tell him something. He initially blurted out, "I hate God," but then said, "No, I don't mean that. I don't even believe in God." Over the next three hours Richard poured out his story. He had become a Christian in college. When his parents' marriage was in trouble he prayed night and day that their marriage would survive; he even dropped out of school and moved home to try to salvage his family. But his parents got divorced. That was his "first bitter experience with unanswered prayer."

He went on to describe how other people talked about God "speaking to them," but he never heard a word. He seemed to pray for guidance and then make the wrong decision time after time. After college the job that had been promised him was given to someone less deserving; his fiancé broke off their engagement w/o any explanation; he faced physical problems that only made his mental and emotional problems worse.

When he looked at all the suffering in the broader world, things didn't seem to be any better; missionaries died in plane crashes, children died of starvation; etc. He began to wonder whether a personal God who actually cared for people even existed. One night he gave God one last chance. He spent four hours pouring out his heart to God, asking for some confirmation that He even existed. At 4 o'clock in the morning when God "hadn't responded," he decided to forget about God and get on with his life. He picked up his Bible and other Christian books, went out back, put them in the brick barbecue grill, squirted lighter fluid on them and lit them on fire. Richard abandoned his faith in God. (See chapter 2 in *Disappointment with God*.)

If you're like me, you've known people like Richard who have become so very disappointed with God that they've experienced a crisis of faith. Some abandon their faith altogether, while others keep the label Christian but scale back their expectations of God so drastically that they can never be disappointed by Him again.

The Bible encourages us to do the opposite of what I've been describing. The Bible tells us to persevere, to endure, to live by faith until the day we die. Ideally, we should all be able to say what Paul was able to say at the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). Consequently there are many encouragements/commands in Scripture to persevere. Today we will consider one such passage in Hebrews 12.

You and I would be foolish not to have a healthy fear of not persevering. The things that challenge and threaten our faith and our perseverance will vary from person to person: it could be the problem of evil/suffering (How can a loving God permit so much pain in the world?); it could be the lure of some sin (which seems preferable to denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Jesus); it could be the threat of persecution (as was the case with the original recipients of the book of Hebrews). And so, we need to anticipate and be prepared spiritually/emotionally/mentally so that we will persevere when/if such challenges come.

Today's passage provides an invaluable perspective on persevering. Hebrews 12:1-3 isn't a formula for persevering, but it does offer an invaluable perspective that could be the difference between perseverance and giving up. The past several weeks we've been studying Jesus' Present Ministry at the right hand of God. Today's passage will make a connection between ***Jesus being seated*** at God's right hand and ***our perseverance***.

The Challenge to Persevere (Hebrews 12:1) Verse 1 begins with the word "therefore," telling us that the author is drawing a conclusion from what's been written in chapter 11.

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The "cloud of witnesses surrounding us" is a reference to the examples of faith mentioned in chapter 11. We have a vast number of people (past and present) whose lives are telling us that it is **possible** and that it is **worth it** to live by faith, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Those mentioned in chapter 11 had some spectacular sins and failures; but they persevered to the end. Their faith remained intact until the end of their lives.

Abraham, for example, is telling us that it's possible to trust God for decades without losing heart and giving up. He tells us that since this world is not our home, it's okay if we don't receive in **this** life everything that has been promised. Moses is telling us that it's possible to fear God more than a king or more than dangerous circumstances. It is possible to choose ill-treatment over "the passing pleasures of sin." Most of us know people who've persevered to the end of their lives.

If we are willing to listen, we have a great cloud of witnesses telling us that it is possible and that it is worth it to live by faith. But - and this is important to acknowledge - you may very well have other witnesses/voices telling you a different message. You may have a voice from your childhood telling you, "You can't do anything right; you aren't smart enough or athletic enough or pretty enough. Therefore it doesn't really matter whether or not you live by faith." One of my mentors right out of college was Dave Simmons. He was accomplished as a professional football player, an author, and a speaker; but until his dying day he had a hard time believing that he wasn't a failure - largely because his father's nickname for him was "Stupe" (which was short for stupid).

Like Dave every one of us needs to be sure we listen to the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us.

“Therefore,” the author tells us, “let us **also** lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us.” It’s hard to run with endurance if you’re wearing heavy clothing and your pockets are full of rocks. An encumbrance isn’t necessarily inherently sinful; it is anything that weighs you down and keeps you from running with endurance. Take an honest look at your life; are there things that make you lethargic and passive instead of giving you life?

We also need to lay aside “the sin which **so easily** entangles us.” Sin is analogous to vines and undergrowth that would entangle someone running through the woods. In each of our lives, certain sins slow us down and keep us from running well. Of course we do not deal with our sin in any absolute sense; the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was the once-for-all sacrifice for our sin (10:26-28). If you trust in Jesus alone, we don’t need to worry about the **penalty** of sin; the penalty we deserved has fallen upon Jesus. But we **do** need to be concerned about the **power** of sin - its power to slow us down and trip us up.

The author talked about this in Hebrews 3:12-13. The perspective there is that avoiding sin that entangles us needs to be a corporate commitment (not a private, individual matter).

12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

If you start at the end of verse 13 and work your way backwards, you will see a progression: Sin is deceitful (it deceives us into thinking things that aren’t true about God, about ourselves, about our relationship with God); the deceitfulness of sin leads to hardening (hardness of heart); such hardening can lead to “an evil unbelieving heart.” We all need to be completely transparent with at least one or two others; those persons need permission to speak into our lives if they see sin, deceit, hardening, or unbelief.

When Hebrews 12:1 tells us to “lay aside. . .the sin that so easily entangles us” we do so by trusting in Jesus alone, by crying out to Jesus in times of temptation, and by living a transparent life before a few others who are committed to encouraging us.

Notice the connection made in this verse: we lay aside sins and encumbrances so that we can “run with endurance the race set before us.” The NIV translates it, “the race **marked out for us.**” The point is that we are called to run a race we didn’t choose. Of course we make decisions along the way that affect our lives, but in most ways we have been given a life to live and a race to run. You were born into a family you didn’t choose; you were given a body and a mind and temperament with certain capacities (and without others); you were given assignments in this life that others haven’t been given; you have experienced hardships that (for whatever reason) others don’t have.

At one time or another we all wish we were living somebody else's life - a life without the specific types of suffering we experience. But have you made peace with the fact that you can only live **your** life? Are you willing to run the race set before **you**?

What the author writes in verses 2 and 3 helps us make peace with the fact that sometimes the race will be hard. Here we see the connection between Jesus' present ministry and our perseverance.

The focus of our Perseverance (Hebrews 12:2-3) As we run with endurance, we not only listen to the cloud of witnesses surrounding us. We also fix our attention upon Jesus, the One who perfectly ran with endurance the race set before **Him**.

2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Since discipleship by definition involves "following Jesus," we have to focus our attention on Jesus. If we fix our eyes on ourselves, on other people, or on what's happening in the world, we may be religious, spiritual, and even moral, but at some point we quit being followers of Jesus. To follow Jesus, we have to fix our eyes on Him. This will involve reading Scriptures that talk about Jesus and thinking deeply about His life, death, resurrection, and exaltation. This isn't a casual, once-in-a-while glance at Jesus; it's a type of ongoing focus that changes the way we think (and feel).

Why? Because He is "the author and perfecter of faith." The term **author** has the connotation of a pioneer, someone who blazes a trail for others to follow. Jesus perfectly embodied the faith of chapter 11 and the faith we can have. As the **perfecter** of faith, Jesus gave faith its fullest, most mature expression. If you want to learn how to run a race from the best who has ever run, focus your attention on Jesus. In Him you will see Someone who perfectly embodies the type of faith we can and should have in this life.

The "race set before" Jesus was to live a sinless life, demonstrate what it means to live in God's Kingdom, and then die on the cross as our substitute. Our author says this about Jesus' endurance: ". . . for the joy set before Him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Notice three details about Jesus' race.

First, "for the joy set before Him" Jesus "endured the cross." The prospect of joy after the resurrection sustained Jesus when He was being tried and crucified. Because He was confident that God would raise Him up on the third day (Matthew 17:22-23), Jesus endured the cross.

Second, Jesus "despis[ed] the shame." In the first century nothing was more shameful than being crucified. The Romans tried to maximize the amount of shame that a person experienced at crucifixion: the person was stripped naked and was left on the cross after death to be eaten by birds (as opposed to being given a proper burial).

Our author says that Jesus “despised” the shame associated with the cross. When you despise something, you look down on it as unworthy of respect. Jesus didn’t respect the shame of the cross as the most powerful force in the universe; Jesus looked down on its shame as something unworthy of distracting Him from His God-appointed mission. That is faith: **He respected God** whom He couldn’t see **more than the shame** of the cross.

If you and I are going to live by faith, we need to learn from Jesus (and Paul and Peter and perhaps some people here in this room) how to despise shame - to look down on shame instead of exalting shame and letting what this world calls shame define and control us.

The third detail we’re told about Jesus’ race is that He has “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” This was the plan all along. The fact that He is **sitting** signifies that His work is finished; the fact that He is sitting **at the right hand of the throne of God** signifies that He occupies a place of honor, power, and authority. He is now experiencing “the joy [that was] set before Him” while on earth. Jesus’ experience confirms that God can be trusted to deliver what He’s promised.

Here we see the connection between Jesus’ present ministry and our perseverance in a couple of ways. First, the fact that Jesus is seated at God’s right hand should give us confidence that we too can live by faith throughout this life. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Second, the fact that Jesus is seated at God’s right hand should remind us that as our great high priest, He can and will give us everything we need to persevere. Back in chapter 4 we saw that since Jesus experienced the same temptations we face, He is uniquely qualified to give us the help we need. As we draw near to God through Him, He pours out grace and mercy at just the right time.

In verse 3 the author points out that “fixing our eyes on Jesus” puts the race we’re running into perspective:

3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The great temptation in this life is to “grow weary and lose heart.” At times all of us get tired of running the race set before us (i.e., following Jesus in the life we’ve been given). The “heart” is the command and control center of our lives. When we “lose heart” we no longer live for Jesus at the center of our being. We may keep up a Christian facade and fake it for a while, but we’re no longer running the race.

And so the author tells us to consider how Jesus “endured such hostility by sinners against Himself.” As we fix our eyes on Jesus, we see that He ran with endurance even though He experienced betrayal, injustice, and ridicule. And when you think about it Jesus was always the smartest and most godly person in the room; in other words, on one level He was surrounded by people who were inferior and less competent than Him.

His experience puts ours into perspective. The message is not, "Don't be a wimp because Jesus had it harder than you." The message is, "The author and perfecter of your faith had it harder than you and ran with endurance the race set before Him. Therefore, by the grace of God, you can run with endurance the race set before you."

There are lots of things we don't know. But those things shouldn't stop us from trusting the things we do know: *We have a great high priest at the right hand of God who ran with endurance as an example for us.*

The Lord's Table.

As we approach the Lord's table today, use Hebrews 12:1-3 as a grid for your meditation:

- Are there things in my life that are slowing me down and keeping me from running with endurance?
- What are the sins that so easily entangle me? Am I allowing anyone else to get close enough to encourage me in this area of my life?
- How does Jesus' perseverance inform the way I run with endurance? How is He an example to me? What type of grace/mercy do I need from Jesus, my great high priest seated at God's right hand?