

Running with Endurance

Hebrews 12:1-3

Today we come to the central challenge of the book of Hebrews. Hebrews 12:1-3 reads:

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

Our author depicts the Christian life as an endurance race. If you are a runner, everything about this passage probably “works” for you. You will find yourselves thinking, “Exactly. Of course I need to learn from others who’ve run the race before me. Of course I need to get rid of things in my life that slow me down or take me off-course. Of course it matters where I look as I run.”

Others of you might find yourself thinking, “I don’t like running. I don’t even like sports. I’d rather think of the Christian life as ‘walking with God’ or even ‘fighting the good fight’ or ‘abiding in Christ.’” If I’m describing you, I would point out that the Christian life is *still* like an endurance race in some important ways. All the other metaphors that the Bible uses for the Christian life are equally valid and have their place in our thinking. But we miss some vital perspectives about the Christian life if we fail to view it as an endurance race also.

However this passage strikes you initially, I would invite you to enter with me into this passage - really into the mind of Christ - so that we might better understand how to persevere for a lifetime. The original readers, the Hebrews, needed this challenge because they were being tempted to drop out of the race. In the past they had run well; they endured persecution and hardship joyfully (see 10:32ff). But now they weren’t so sure if it’s worth it to sacrifice for the cause of Christ. They needed to be reminded that the Christian life is an endurance race: it matters how you run and whether or not you finish well. The same is true for us, so let’s enter into this passage and listen for the voice of God.

Run with endurance the race set before you. (Hebrews 12:1) Listen again to verse 1:

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 don’t merely have the witness of a couple of people who have walked by faith and persevered through this life. We have “so great a cloud of witnesses” - a vast number of people 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. We took four weeks teaching through chapter 11, trying to hear what they are saying to us.

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. As Brian discussed last week, others are telling us that when you walk by faith sometimes you will experience triumph and other times you might experience tragedy.

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. You will have other witnesses/voices giving you a different message. You may have a voice from your childhood telling you, "You can't do anything right, and that includes walking by faith. You'll always blow it." Or "You aren't smart enough or athletic enough or pretty enough. Therefore it doesn't really matter whether or not you live by faith." Given these other witnesses surrounding us, we need to be sure we listen to the witnesses of Hebrews 11.

"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." Just like Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and all the others in chapter 11 did, we need to "lay aside" the things that will slow us down or trip us up in the race we're running. The term "lay aside" evokes the imagery of runners taking off excess clothing so that they can run unimpeded. Running gear is typically light-weight and allows for ease of motion. It's hard to run with endurance if you're wearing heavy clothing and your pockets are full of rocks.

In the endurance race known as "the Christian life" we need to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us." An encumbrance isn't necessarily inherently sinful; it is anything that weighs you down and keeps you from running with endurance. This is where we need to be wise about how we practice our "freedom in Christ." In 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul pointed out that "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable." You may be able to identify things that you shouldn't do even though you have the freedom to do those things. They may not be inherently sinful, but they may be unprofitable in the race you're running.

Given your past, your weaknesses, your personality, your circumstances, what things weigh you down and keep you from running with endurance? I talked with somebody this week who told me that he has to limit the amount of news he watches on television because it makes him angry. There's nothing sinful about watching the news on television, but it could be an encumbrance. If you're going to lay aside "every encumbrance" you are responsible to identify those things that keep you from running well. Take an honest look at how you spend your time and your money; evaluate the 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. Given everything we've seen in Hebrews about sin, the author is NOT saying that God expects us to get rid of our sin on our own. He's not saying that until you clean up your life you can't run the race. What **does** Hebrews say about laying aside sin?

First and foremost, Hebrews tells us that Jesus was the once-for-all sacrifice for our sin (10:26-28). If you trust in Jesus alone, you don't have to worry about the penalty of sin; the penalty we deserved has fallen upon Jesus. We're concerned about the power of sin - its power to slow us down and trip us up. As well, Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us that we have a great high priest in Jesus who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" and who is very willing to come to our rescue in times of temptation.

As well, we saw back in Hebrews 3:12-13 that dealing with sin is a corporate commitment (not a private, individual matter). There the author talked about "the deceitfulness of sin"; sin fools us and deceives us into thinking things that aren't true (about God, about ourselves, about our relationship with God). The deceitfulness of sin means that we all have blind spots, and therefore we all need at least a few others who know us well enough to help us with the deceitfulness of sin. We were never meant to deal with our sin in isolation from others.

And so when Hebrews tells us to "lay aside. . .the sin that so easily entangles us" we understand that 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.

In addition to identifying encumbrances, one of the most strategic things you can do is identify the specific sins that "so easily entangle" you. What sins demoralize you and make you want to drop out of the race? What sins "so easily entangle you" and keep you from running well? Are you willing to engage your will and do the hard work of "laying aside" those sins? If not, you need to be honest with God. You might need to admit, "God, right now I love this sin more than I love you."

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; you were given assignments in this life that others haven't been given.

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. He tells us:

Focus your attention on Jesus and learn from the way He ran His race. (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.

As we run the race of this life, it matters where we are looking. Edward Welch suggests that we look at Jesus 10x for every time we look at ourselves. Our author tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus 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 advocated and illustrated in chapter 11. Because Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplished our salvation, we can now follow Jesus and live the same life of faith.

Jesus is “the author ***and perfecter*** of faith.” This is the only instance of this term in the New Testament. As the perfecter of faith, Jesus gave faith its fullest, most mature expression. In other words, 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 sure and confident that God would raise Him up on the third day (Matthew 17:22-23), Jesus endured the cross. We saw this same mindset among those described in chapter 11. They looked past beyond this life to the rewards they would experience in the next life, in the heavenly city/country/kingdom.

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. Crucifixion typically happened outside the city limits on a hill or mountain; the person was stripped naked; the person was left on the cross after death to be eaten by birds (as opposed to being given a proper burial). In the Roman world this type of shame was meant to be a deterrent to others who might break laws.

Our author says that Jesus “despised” the shame associated with the cross. The term despise meant to “look down on something” - as in 1 Timothy 4:12 where Paul told Timothy, “Let no one look down on [despise] your youthfulness. . .” When you despise something, you look down on it as unworthy of respect. That’s what Jesus did in relation

to the shame of the cross. He didn't respect shame as the most powerful force in the universe (as many people do); Jesus looked down on 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 people that He could see.

The topic of shame is so huge and so relevant in all of our lives, this spring we are doing a four-week sermon series on shame (the 4 weeks leading up to Easter). For now I'll just say that 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 thinking that the worst thing that can happen to you is experience what this world calls shame. What the world sees as shameful is unworthy of distracting us from the life God wants us to live.

The third detail we're told about Jesus' race is that He has "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." 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. 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.

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 endured 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 isn't, "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."

Conclusion. I'm kind of a sucker for a good Olympic story. . . You may have heard about Heidi Kloser, the skier who had a terrible accident on a training run (moguls) before the Olympics even started. She tore her ACL (knee) and fractured her femur. When she was in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, she asked her parents "if she was still an Olympian." They said, "Of course you are." I saw an interview with her yesterday morning in which she said she's planning to compete in the 2018 Olympics in South

Korea. That's the attitude the author of Hebrews is advocating spiritually concerning "the race set before us."

You may feel broken and bruised and helpless. You may be looking up at your heavenly Father wondering if you can still be considered a follower of Christ. If you trust in Jesus alone, you need to know that your heavenly Father is saying to you, "Of course you are. The blood of Jesus pays for all your sin. Don't grow weary and give up. You have a great cloud of witnesses and a great high priest in Jesus. By My grace, run with endurance the race set before you."