

## ***Jesus' Perseverance and Our Perseverance***

Hebrews 12:1-3

Since Easter is next Sunday, we are taking a two-week break from our series in the book of 1 John. Next week, of course, we'll be talking about the resurrection of Jesus. Today we are going to consider a passage of Scripture that urges us to focus on Jesus, especially the things He experienced during the last week of His earthly life.

Please stand as I read Hebrews 12:1–3.

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.

Many of you know the the author and pastor, Tim Keller. About a year ago (at age 69) he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer; as you may know the survival rates are very low. Like most pastors, Keller has had many opportunities to talk with others who had gotten a diagnosis like his. And he noticed that sometimes people's faith was "shaken or destroyed" when they found out they would die "at a time and in a way that seemed unfair to them."

*"One woman with cancer told me years ago, 'I'm not a believer anymore—that doesn't work for me. I can't believe in a personal God who would do something like this to me.' Cancer killed her God."*

After his diagnosis, Keller began to wonder if **his** faith was strong enough to sustain him through his suffering and death, whether that happened sooner or later. One of the things Keller felt like he needed to evaluate was his view of God. Specifically, he wondered:

*"Had [my faith] been shaped by my culture? Had I been slipping unconsciously into the supposition that God lived for me rather than I for him, that life should go well for me, that I knew better than God does how things should go? The answer was yes—to some degree."*

Even though Keller has walked with God for many years, he has purposed in his heart to deepen his faith through the Scriptures and prayer. He wants to walk by faith until his final breath. You could say that he wants to cross the finish line running strong spiritually. The biblical term for this is perseverance/endurance. We are urged to walk by faith to the end of our lives no matter what hardships we face.

Today's passage, Hebrews 12:1-3, gives us a vision for such perseverance. The original recipients of this letter were tempted to quit walking with Christ. They were Jews who

came to understand that Jesus was the promised Messiah. They were originally very passionate in their discipleship; they had gladly suffered persecution because of their loyalty to Jesus. But somewhere along the way they got beaten down and worn out by their suffering. One option for alleviating their suffering was simply to return to Judaism and quit following Christ. Immediately the threat of persecution would evaporate and they could return to their former life. Throughout the book of Hebrews the author encourages his readers to “hold fast” to what they believed about Jesus and to endure/persevere.

We too can get beaten down and worn out; we too can be tempted to go back to our old way of life (where that was another religion or no religion), thinking that would solve most or all of our problems. In light of that possibility, let’s consider Hebrews 12:1-3. Here we see 1) the mentality of perseverance (how we need to think) and 2) the focus of perseverance (where we need to look).

***The Mentality of Perseverance*** (*Hebrews 12:1*) Notice how the author of Hebrews calls the readers to “own” their perseverance. It’s not the case that some people just naturally persevere and others randomly end up losing their faith. God keeps us close **as** we do everything we can to endure.

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 “great cloud of witnesses surrounding us” is a reference to the men and women mentioned in chapter 11, people whose lives are described in the Old Testament. People like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab and many others. They persevered through weaknesses, warfare, beatings, imprisonments, stonings, being sawn in two, being put to death by the sword, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated. But they persevered in faith; they never abandoned God.

They are “witnesses” because their lives tell us that it’s **possible** and it’s **worth it** to persevere and walk by faith. If we care to notice, we will see many examples in the OT of flawed, imperfect people who nevertheless persevered and therefore experience great reward.

The author says “. . . let us also [just as they did] 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 term translated “race” can also be translated fight (2 Timothy 4:7 - “I have fought the good fight. . .”) or struggle (Colossians 2:1). So he’s not talking about a jog in your neighborhood; it’s more like a grueling, long-distance race that requires incredible stamina and endurance.

Let’s notice a couple things about this race. First, it’s “the race **set before us**.” There’s a sense in which we don’t get to choose the race we’re running because we don’t choose most of the circumstances of our lives. We didn’t choose our parents or siblings; we didn’t choose the culture and country in which we were born and raised; we didn’t

choose our size or shape or personality or a dozen other important things about ourselves. This means that we don't get to choose the race we're running. A "race is set before us" in terms of the specific challenges we face and assignments we're given.

Second, like a runner who wants to be as unburdened as possible, we are responsible to "**lay aside**" the things that slow us down and trip us up. In other words, with God's help it's **our** responsibility to deal decisively with the things that keep us from living by faith until our dying breath.

The author mentions every "**encumbrance**" or weight. That refers to anything that slows you down whether it's inherently sinful or not. In our context, an encumbrance could be anything from our habits of eating, drinking, and sleeping to our choices in entertainment and recreation. Each of us needs to be honest with ourselves about the encumbrances that slow us down in the race we're running.

The author also mentions laying aside the "**sin that so easily entangles us.**" Sin is mentioned twenty-five times in the book of Hebrews. In chapter 3, for example, the author warns again the progression that begins with sin and ends up in unbelief. He speaks about how sin deceives us. . . which leads to hardness of heart (no longer soft toward God). . . which leads to an unbelieving heart (Hebrews 3:12-13). If sin goes unchecked in our lives, we won't run with endurance; we won't cross the finish line with our faith intact. (See Heb. 11:23-28 for Moses' example).

I'm not suggesting that it's easy or quick to set aside encumbrances and sins that weigh us down and trip us up. I've found it to be neither easy nor quick when I'm dealing with my sins. But here's the mentality of perseverance is this: *By God's grace, like others before me, I will run my race with endurance, laying aside everything that slows me down and trips me up.* Our study in 1 John will encourage and enlighten this same mentality.

Next, let's consider . . .

***The Focus of Perseverance (Hebrews 12:2-3)*** While we should be encouraged and strengthened knowing that people like Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Rahab set aside every encumbrance and sin and ran their races with endurance, our ultimate focus is elsewhere.

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.

Whereas many, many people have walked by faith, Jesus has done so uniquely and perfectly. Therefore He should be our focus as we run our race. First, He is called "**author** . . . of faith." Some translations render it the "pioneer" or "founder" of our faith. The idea is that Jesus blazed a trail of faith (dependence upon God) unlike that of anybody else - mainly because He was unique (the sinless Son of God who became one of us) and His mission was unique (to be the once-for-all sacrifice for sin).

Jesus is also the **perfecter** of faith in the sense that He perfectly trusted His heavenly Father. If He hadn't run His race perfectly (living a sinless life and dying as our substitute), we wouldn't be saved.

How He perfected faith is stated in the rest of the verse. The "joy set before Him" was the reward He would experience after the cross. He would have joy when He was exalted and enthroned at the right hand of God. He would also have joy when those who believed in Him and followed Him through this life joined Him in their heavenly home. That prospect of future joy sustained Jesus during His suffering.

For the joy set before Him, Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame." The author deliberately mentions that Jesus **endured** the cross to reinforce that those who want to **run with endurance** should fix their eyes on Him and His suffering. We're told that He despised the shame associated with the cross. A crucifixion was intentionally designed to be the most shameful experience possible: you were stripped naked, nailed to a cross to bleed and die publicly, and typically left on the cross to be eaten by birds (instead of being given a proper burial).

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.

The author mentions for the fifth time in the book of Hebrews that Jesus "has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (a reference to Psalm 110:1). As one commentator put it, "it's the prize that came to him at the end of his race" (O'Brien, 458). The fact that Jesus ran His race and got His reward guarantees that after we run our race, we will also receive our reward (which is Jesus Himself).

The focus of perseverance is this: *I will fix my eyes on Jesus to be convinced that it is possible and worth it to persevere.*

This mentality and focus is reinforced in verse 3. Notice how Jesus' endurance is supposed to inform our endurance.

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

When we think that we're being required to endure something we think is unreasonable or unfair, considering what Jesus endured will change our perspective. To "grow weary and lose heart" means that you've become so weary that you no longer live from the heart. Instead of being energetic and full of faith, you're lethargic; you're not persevering, just going through the motions.

**Conclusion.** And so this week I'd like to invite and encourage you to join the rest of the church in fixing your eyes on Jesus, considering Him, noticing the hostility He endured.

Whatever your age or stage of life, this is an opportunity to deepen your faith and make an investment in your perseverance. It's been said that "you need to weave the parachute before you jump out of the plane" (Philip Yancey). You don't want to wait until you're in a free fall to prepare yourself for suffering and hardship. One way to do that is to fix your eyes on Jesus and become more and more convinced that it's possible and worth it to persevere.

Toward that end we are providing a Scripture reading and a video meditation via email Monday through Saturday. If you already receive the eBlast on Tuesdays you will receive these emails. If you don't receive the eBlast, you can sign up for it today using the Church Center app or by filling out the Online Connection card on our web site and check the box that says eBlast (you can unsubscribe at any time).

We'll encourage you to think about the things you have to endure in light of the things that Jesus endured: betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, interrogated by Herod and Pilate and given a death sentence though innocent, mocked, beaten, flogged, a crown of thorns pressed onto His head, and then the crucifixion. This week we will encourage you to look at the ways you've been betrayed, denied, disappointed, misunderstood, misrepresented, perhaps mocked and shamed by others. . . we will encourage you to look at your physical and mental and emotional suffering. . . . in light of what Jesus endured at the hands of sinful people.

This discipline isn't meant to suggest that our hardships are trivial and insignificant. The point isn't "your life isn't that bad, so just gut it out and persevere!" No, Hebrews tells us that everything Jesus endured on earth makes Him empathetic and qualified to help us endure. The point of this discipline is to convince us more deeply that it is possible and worth it to persevere until our dying breath.