

August 14, 2022

**Hebrews 12:1-13** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Dear fellow winners of the race God has marked out for us;

Some years ago, I met a man who came from a God-fearing family, a personable, gifted young man who didn't always fit in with his family. In fact, he was hated by most, if not all of his siblings. He found himself in career that wasn't his first choice, but he had remarkable success, until, through no fault of his own he was fired. Fired, falsely accused of a crime he didn't commit and then sentenced to prison.

Here is what impresses me about this young man: I've never heard him complain about his difficult lot in life or the many challenges he's faced. In fact, he seems to harbor no bitterness and is very forgiving toward those who have wronged him.

Most of you also know this man. I met him over 50 years ago in Genesis chapter 30. His name is Joseph, and he is just one of the many heroes of faith that we find in Hebrews 11, the basis for Pastor Wordell's sermon last weekend. This week we look at Hebrews 12 and consider this thought:

**“Christian, keep on running!”**

- 1. Run looking at the past**
- 2. Run looking at today**
- 3. Run looking at Jesus**

**I. Run looking at yesterday.** In verse 1 of our text, the writer says, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...”* If you were here last week, you know the witnesses or “testifiers” he's referring to: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab and so many others. The reason for that long list of men and women in chapter 11 wasn't to shame those 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christians, but rather to inspire and encourage them as they ran their own race. It wasn't as though they had never heard of these Old Testament heroes, but they needed the reminder that these men and women weren't just characters in a best-selling book, but they were men and women who had faced more than a few challenges and difficult circumstances and their faith sustained them.

Such clear examples of faith, and they ran with much less vision than the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. It was quite some time after Noah was told to build an ark before the heavens opened and the rain began. Joseph was ripped away from his family home and ends up a slave in a foreign

country. Moses was asked to change careers a 3<sup>rd</sup> time and lead a nation out of slavery. With the benefit of more than a few thousand years of hindsight, we read those accounts and know exactly how they'll end. Noah and his family survive the Flood, Joseph rises to become the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt and Moses not only delivers the Israelites from Egypt but also leads them through 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

And so in the first verse of our text, the writer says, “**Therefore**”. Therefore means “consequently” or “as a result.” He’s saying, “Dear readers, in view of all of these faithful believers who have gone before, don’t be surprised when your lives don’t go as smoothly as you’d like. Consider that long list of Old Testament heroes of faith that spanned a thousand years of history. What do they all have in common? Every single one of them? Struggles. They struggled against a multitude of enemies who were determined to destroy them, destroy God’s Word and destroy their faith in that Word. Some of them struggled against former friends and family members who rejected that Word and the God who gave them that Word. And every one of them struggled against their own sins of weakness and sins of doubt which threatened to drown any hope that they had. Hebrews 11 isn’t so much a story about man’s faith as it is about God’s grace. God kept every promise he made to them.

The author of Hebrews knew that his readers had struggles of their own, not the least of which was their inner turmoil over this question: “Is it worth it?” All of the stress, suffering and sorrow? Well, where were those Old Testament heroes now? Not just in a cloud of fellow witnesses, but wrapped in a cloud with God himself and all of his love and radiance. So for Joseph, dropped into a foreign and hostile country as a teenager with no friends and hundreds of miles from home, was it worth it? For Moses, 40 years of what at times must have seemed like hopelessly aimless wandering in a desolate land, was it worth it? Let God himself give us the answer through the apostle Paul, a man who knew a little bit about suffering: **I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.**

Romans 8:18

What do we learn from the past? If God took care of a 17 year old who was dropped into a foreign country without friends and family, then God can take care of your son or daughter as you drop off them at college, or they head off to high school or preK for the first time. We can find such comfort and encouragement in the lives of those who have finished their race, including our own personal heroes of faith. who have run before. Some of us have parents or grandparents who struggled through the Great Depression, or war, or the fear of a Cold War. Grandparents or great grandparents who were harassed and threatened because they spoke German instead of English. Family members who were ravaged by their battle with cancer. Was it worth it? No child of God has ever arrived in heaven, looked around and then found Jesus and said, “Hey, I thought it would be a lot nicer than this.”

## II. And so we keep on running our race, looking at the past, but then also looking at today.

In our text the writer says: *Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* The race marked out for us. That word “race” perhaps doesn’t fully convey the reality of what the writer means. The Greek word that’s used is **ἀγώνα**. You don’t have to know Greek to see and hear that word and find a common English word...the word agony. Run the agony, the conflict, the fight, the wrestling match that is in front of you. And why is it in front of you? Our text says, *let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*

It’s marked out for us, plotted for us by God himself. 3800 years ago God didn’t look down and say, “Joseph! You’re in prison? For doing the right thing and saying no to Potiphar’s wife? What are you going to do now? 400 years later God didn’t look down and say, “Moses, the Egyptian army is behind you and this big body of water is in front of you? How did that happen? What are you going to do now?”

The race God marked out for them wasn’t easy, but neither was it beyond what their faith could handle. Since we can clearly see how those OT heroes successfully finished their races, we get that. But what about us in 2022. How many times have you been blindsided by trials in your life that you never saw coming? For me, more than I can count. But not one time has God looked down at you shouldering through yet another challenge and said, “Whoops, I didn’t see that one coming.” But that doesn’t mean it’s easy for us. What’s God’s advice?

*Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance.* Throw off everything that hinders. I wonder if living in a country that has been so blessed by God doesn’t present its own set of challenges. Many of the races run by Christians in other countries come with obstacles that we’ve never encountered. Russian shells landing on schools and hospitals? Not in America. Surviving in a country with a median income of \$1200? Not in America. Norwegians paying \$11.00 for a gallon of gas? Not in America. And so when all of a sudden we as Christians—American Christians—find that our race is taking us through uncharted territory, perhaps we don’t react with patience and perseverance that we should. Pandemics? That’s what happens in Africa, not America. Violent civil unrest in cities on the west coast and midwest and on the steps and in the halls of our nation’s capital? That happens in South America, not in the US. Christians being harassed by fellow citizens? That happens in Indonesia, not in America. How can this be happening?

And then if through the faith God has given us we press on through those challenges, we still face an even greater obstacle than high gas prices, masks, and angry political opponents. We face our own sins, **the sins that so easily entangle us.** What sin so easily entangles you? That is perhaps something that is only between you and God, but don’t be reluctant to have a conversation with the God who promises that **no temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can**

**bear to help you fight every temptation you face.** 1 Cor.10:13. Only with God's help can you run through the spiritual fatigue you face as you struggle through your earthly race, but with God's help your success is guaranteed.

**III. Finally, Keep on running...looking at Jesus.** We read in our text: **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God.**

**Fix your eyes on Jesus:** literally: look away from everything else and look only at Jesus. Such game-changing advice. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter, the author and finisher of our faith. Don't look at the roller coaster of your faith, rather look at the one who began your faith through his death and resurrection, planted your faith in you through his Word and now promises that through that Word to give you everything you need to persevere in your race. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

And perhaps this also a special challenge for us. As American Christians, where do you find your ultimate security? Is it in our U.S. citizenship and the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and the 1st amendment and 2nd amendment, or do we find it in God's promises? God didn't promise we'd have freedom of speech or freedom of religion. The Christian Church grew exponentially under regimes without freedom of speech. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus didn't say "I've not come to bring peace, but a sword" except for 'Merca. For 'Merca, I guarantee only peace, life and the pursuit of happiness." No, God tells us that we must go through many hardships before we enter the kingdom of heaven, but that no hardship we face can separate us from his love.

And now for perhaps the most beautiful comfort found in this text: **Fix our eyes on Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross...** What was the joy set before Jesus that carried him along that race that God had marked out for him? It was the joy in know what was at the end of this race. In spite of the fact that before his race ended with his resurrection and ascension it would be marked by history's most agonizing death Jesus' heart was filled with joy at the thought of achieving our salvation. His joy? His joy was you...his joy was me. Keep on running your race with joy, for you are Jesus' joy and his delight.

Where and when is your finish line? Few if any of us know. If you could see your finish line, what would you see? A hospital bed? Assisted living? Hospice? A sudden accident? I don't know. But with all of the confidence that only God's promises can offer, I do know who you will see: Standing at your finish line is Jesus. So keep on running...and always run to Jesus.

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