



Therefore...Run the Race!

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 12:1-3

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Well, beloved, we are starting the 12th chapter of Hebrews this morning and you may have noticed that while we read it, it sounded a whole lot like a concluding exhortation in light of everything that we read in chapter 11. And if you thought that, you would be right. This is one of those strange chapter breaks in the Bible that doesn't make a lot of sense. You know that the chapters and verses in the Bible were added later, right, to make the navigation of the Bible easier. They are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. In most cases, they are right on the money, but in this case, not so much. This is the conclusion to chapter 11 and if we have been paying attention, we kind of expect this, don't we?

The incredible, real life examples of Hebrews 11, the pictures of faithfulness, of endurance and trust in God, the pictures of faith triumphing in blessing and faith triumphing in sustaining, of faith ultimately rewarded, are all leading somewhere. All the stories are leading to this exhortation from the writer of Hebrews to run our own race and to run it to the finish line. Each of these people that he has named and the stories of those that have remained unnamed all point to the reality that just as they who have gone before us had a race of faith to run, so do we.

If you have been on a football team, or played an organized sport, or if you have seen the movie "Remember the Titans" or "Hoosiers" or "Glory Road," you know that part of the coach's job is to give a rousing pre-game speech. Some do better than others. I can remember my own coaches talking about all the players who came before us, who through blood, sweat and tears triumphed on the gridiron, and then told us to carry on the proud tradition of Warrior football – and we bought into all of it. And that is what is going on here. There is a shift in focus taking place from the past to the present.

A Shift – The Past to the Present This conclusion, this exhortation, doesn't come out of nowhere. The pastor has been building to this point. All throughout this book, as he has pointed to the supremacy and glory of Jesus Christ, as he has thoroughly emphasized the fullness of redemption, the blessings of salvation, the blood-bought atonement, the righteousness purchasing salvation of Jesus Christ, His priestly work to be our substitute and the sacrifice for our sin, his resurrection from the dead to continually intercede for us before the throne of God, he has been building to this point. All along the way, we have heard him calling us to endure, to persevere, to be alert. Don't drift away, don't be sluggish, don't coast through life, but hold fast to the faith. Hold fast to Christ.

And here, we have this great exhortation, **“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,” (Hebrews 12:1c, ESV)** Run! This phrase is the center of these three verses, the central point of this text and everything else either describes how to run or establishes the motivation to run, but the central theme of these verses is “Run”! Run the race that is before you and do not quit.

From the past descriptions of the faithful, he puts the focus specifically on the Hebrew Christians and us. He says, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,” (Hebrews 12:1, ESV)** This is so amazing and I want you to see what the writer is doing here. He is telling the Hebrew Christians, and he is telling us, “You are in a long line godly men and women. You are part of the great company of God's people, a long line of God-pursuers who believed that faithfulness to the Lord was of far greater worth than anything that this life could offer, part of a long line of those who have run the race and completed it. They stand as a testimony to you that faith in Christ is the greatest and the highest pursuit of life.”

And that is the idea here. It is not, as some have described, that we are in a great coliseum and these saints of old are seated in the stands munching on manna and watching us. Rather, the idea of the word, “martus” from which we get the word “martyr,” is that their lives stand as a witness to us of the surpassing worth of God above everything else. Think of it more like this. The emphasis is not on what the witnesses see in us, that we are the center attraction, but that rather the emphasis is on what we see in them. They stand as witnesses to us of the character of committed faith and the reward that awaits every faithful runner. They line the race, encouraging us by the witness of their own faithful endurance.

We are surrounded, the course we run, is lined by a great cloud of witnesses, people like us, who were commended not for flawless, failure free life, but for faith. They stand along the way, the testimony of their lives calling us to live by faith as they did. As they failed at times, so will we, but they got up and continued running and we must do the same. As their faith was sometimes rewarded with astounding success and other times with suffering, that will be our experience too. As they persevered in faith, so must we. Beloved, we are surrounded by a vast multitude, a “great cloud” of faithful witnesses. They are encouraging us by their testimonies: “Take heart; you are not the first ones to run this extremely difficult marathon. We have already run the race and finished it. We believed in the one true God and in his word, and we assure you that God is true and faithful to his covenant. Believe God as we did, and you will finish the race. So run hard after God.” But the message is clear,

There is A Race to Be Run... So Run It! Notice the way that the writer calls the Hebrew church to run the race. He urges them **“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,” (Hebrews 12:1c, ESV)** In other words, he urges the Hebrews to join with him in running the race, to do it together. Let’s get on with running the race of faith and let’s do it together – no stragglers, no one left behind, no one dropping out of the race, no one taking off on their own. The pastor is weary and done with people falling away. His heart is, “Let’s run this race together.” Do you see that?

Now let me say a couple of things about this race of faith. This race that is to be run, our race of faith, is an “agona” from which we get the word, “agony.” In other words, it isn’t a leisurely jog; it is struggle. It isn’t a 100-meter sprint, it is a marathon or a cross-country run. It is a race that you begin running at the moment of salvation and continue running for the rest of your life.

And I need to say something about this, right here, so that we don’t have any misconceptions. All of this is by grace. Ok? This is not an encouragement to salvation by your own hard work and diligence. That is not the focus here at all. Think of the testimony of Ephesians 2:8-10. Salvation, as we know, is entirely by grace through faith. Paul writes, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV)** But that isn’t the end of it as Paul goes on to say in verse 10, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)**

It is all grace from beginning to end. This race that we are to run, this race that has been set before us, has been planned for us from the foundation of the world. We all run the same race – same beginning and same goal – although the particulars do vary. In other words, although the race is the same, the course that I have to run may not be the same as yours. The course for each runner is not the same. I may not be able to finish your course but I am not called to. You may not be able to finish my race, but you are not called to do that either. The terrain varies, the obstacles and trials are different, the challenges may be different and vary in intensity, the course is different for all of us but each one is designed for our ultimate good and for the ultimate glory of God and every one of us can finish the race before us. You can finish the race, beloved! – because of the grace of Jesus Christ. His grace is sufficient for the course that God has established for you.

The race begins with the new birth – salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Apart from that grace we are not even in the race. But we run the race not to be saved but because we are saved, not to be forgiven but because we are forgiven, not to cover our guilt but because all of our guilt is gone, not so that God will love us but because we are loved by God and adopted as His own, we run the race. But we don't run the race by "digging deep and gutting it out." No! We run because we are united to the strength, the power and the grace of Jesus Christ. We run because Christ has made us His own and given us the promise that He "will never leave us or forsake us." We run, confident in the promise of the Lord, that ***"He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength... they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."*** (Isaiah 40:29–31, ESV) We run to win the prize of eternal life.

We run because the entire scope and focus of our lives has been changed as a result of our salvation through the sacrificial, substitutionary, wrath-bearing death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having been pursued by Christ, having been granted saving faith as the gift of God and not of ourselves lest any man should boast... now we pursue Christ, we run the race with everything that is in us. With endurance, with passion, with focus we must run the race that God has put before us, the course that He has specifically fashioned for each one of us. Turning from sin and the world in repentance and trust in Christ is not the finishing line, it's the starting blocks. Christ saves; God empowers, but we must run!

One writer put it like this. He said, “To be faithful to Scripture, we must maintain the biblical tension between our responsibility to exercise enduring faith to run the race and the truth that our faith and ability to exercise it is itself a gift from God. If we exclude our role as human beings in the race, we encourage a passivity and laxity that says, “Let go and let God.” Meanwhile, if we exclude the idea that God is ultimately behind our salvation and our running, we introduce the heretical idea that salvation is based on our works. Both of these extremes must be rejected out of hand.” We can and we will finish this race, but there are some things that we need to do. We must be

Streamlined for the Race Look, I am no authority on running but I have watched enough races to know that if you want to run and win, there are some things you must do to prepare. I have never seen a Sumo wrestler win a steeplechase and I have never seen anyone compete in a race wearing a parka and winter boots – at least not in the Olympics. Likewise, the writer of Hebrews gives us some clear direction as to how we are to run this race, he says to us, **“Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,”** (Hebrews 12:1, ESV)

Here’s the picture. The runner in ancient days, as today, was first of all a lean guy – no extra weight to burden him, no extra bulk. Second, he often ran naked, or as in our days, wearing very skimpy clothing so that nothing could trip him up. That is what the writer of Hebrews is getting at. He is speaking about two things, that if we want to run the race of faith well, we must rid ourselves of.

The first thing he speaks of is **every weight**. The weights of which he speaks are not sins necessarily, although they may be, but rather the amoral things in our lives, the things that are not inherently evil or sinful but which hinder us from running the race as we should, the stuff that weighs us down. Now for the Hebrews to whom he is writing, some of those weights were obvious – the temple, the priests and rituals and ceremonies of the Jewish religion, their concern for their reputation and social standing. For some of us, who have come out of Catholicism or another religion, there are certain weights that we need to cast off as we come to know and live according to the gospel more fully and completely, right?

But on the main, for us, what is in view are things that can be neutral, that are not in and of themselves evil or sinful but that hinder our endurance, that suck our energies that should

be devoted to pursuing and following Christ -- TV, books, web-surfing, social media, music, hobbies, recreation, sports, entertainment, relationships that we foster. Lots of times we look at those things and say, "What's wrong with it?" But beloved, and I know this sounds radical, that's not the question. But instead we need to ask the question, "Does this help me grow in godliness... does it drive me toward Christ?"

Now look, before you think that I am pointing a finger at you from my high and lofty perch, I confess this is not a question that I have always asked. It is not a question that I always even want to ask, but it is one that I must ask if I want to run the race well and so must you.

Ask God what may be intruding on your ability to run the race. What sucks your energy from holy things? What keeps you from God's Word, from worship, from prayer, from serving Christ? It could be a friendship that is too engrossing. It could be the love of sleep. It may be a habit that saps away all of our energy. It can be any of the things I mentioned or something else entirely. It takes Biblical wisdom and discernment to figure this out. What are weights to some are not weights to others. To run the race, you've got to lay aside these encumbrances. As John Piper said, "The race of the Christian life is not fought well or run well by asking, 'What is wrong with this or that?' but by asking 'is it in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and greater patience and greater self-control? Does it help me run?'" Can I glorify God; am I glorifying God in this thing I do? To run well, we have to lay aside the weights that hinder us.

Then second, we must **lay aside... sin which clings so closely**. The picture here is of something that wraps itself around the arms or legs of the runner, impeding his progress, tripping him up and causing him to crash head over heels on the course. It is a perfect picture of sin, isn't it? What the preacher is exhorting us to do is to deal with our sin by becoming honest and plainspoken in examining our hearts and calling sin -- sin -- in our lives. We need to hate it, be repulsed by it, and then we must turn away from it in repentance and faith seeking the cleansing and detangling of God's grace.

Proverbs 28:13 is excellent counsel for us here. God says, "**Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,**" Someone weighed down with sin will never win the race. He will stumble, grow weary and collapse. But the second half of the verse says: "**but he**

who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” (Proverbs 28:13, ESV) If we are to run this race we must confess and forsake our sin completely, without engaging in any kind of compromise with God. God doesn’t compromise with sin, but instead provides forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness if we are faithful to confess our sin.

Now this verse is talking about all sin, obviously, but traditionally theologians have also understood this verse to be speaking specifically of besetting sin, sin that clings closely, certain sins that we specifically wrestle hard with. It isn’t the same for everyone. Some people struggle mightily with sensual sins, others with lying and deceit, others with financial integrity, some with pride and self-centeredness, some with discontentment, some with jealousy, some more with envy, some with a lack of gentleness, some with a critical and judgmental spirit, some with anger more than others, some with their tongue. Certain sins are more of a problem for some people than they are for others. You can see it in the OT saints that the preacher mentioned – Abraham wrestled with fear, Jacob with deceit, Moses with his anger, Samson with sensuality and the list goes on.

If we are going to run the race well, we need to especially fight those besetting sins that cling so closely. We need to heed the counsel of others who see what we may not see, those who know us well, those who graciously and lovingly offer specific counsel – maybe a friend, your spouse – and not get defensive and fire back, but hear and deal with our sin with the Lord. Gretch has done this with me, Eddie, Brett, John Cline, Jerry, Les, Mark, Adam, John-John – some without even knowing it. It’s hard, but it is necessary if we want to run the race and run it well. And then, continually laying aside the weights that get in the way and laying aside the sins that are continually seeking to trip us up

We Must Set Our Focus on Jesus Christ The way we run with endurance the race that is before us is to lift our eyes to Jesus Christ. The preacher tells us that our proper focus is to be **“looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:2, ESV)** Apart from looking to Jesus, everything else is for naught. Do you see that? All of the other examples of faith that the writer has given to us are flawed, but not Jesus. All the other examples of faith that the writer has given to us may inspire us, but they cannot empower us. Jesus Christ does and can.

Look at how he describes Jesus, as ***the founder and perfecter of our faith***. Look to Jesus, he says, the founder and perfecter of our faith, in the Greek, the archegos and the teliothes. Jesus is the founder of our faith, the author, the trailblazer, pathfinder, and pioneer. He is the one who opened up and prepared the way for us to follow and who brought us to God through the cross. He blazed our trail as our representative and as the forerunner of our faith. He did it by His faithfulness and humble submission to the Father, in His perfect law-fulfilling obedience to God the Father, through His willing sacrifice on the cross, taking our place by dying for our sins and then being resurrected to new life glorified the Father by completing the work that the Father gave Him to do. Jesus is the founder of our faith, the Christian faith and our individual and personal faith in Him as Savior and Lord. He sought us and He is the source of it all.

More than that, He is the perfecter of our faith. Our faith reaches its culmination in Him. He is the one who begins our faith and He is the one who will bring it to completion, to perfection. In the words of Phil 1:6, ***“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”*** (Philippians 1:6, ESV) By His life giving power in us, He is the beginning and the end and the sum of our faith.

Look to Jesus, he says, who offers us a perfect example of triumphant faith, of the race of faith well run, ***who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God***. Just think about this for a moment. Jesus lived in every way by trust in the joy that God the Father promised to give Him after He ran the course that was prescribed by the Father. How could He endure what He did? No one ever endured a greater trial than He did. Jesus knew the glory and joy of perfect fellowship with the Father in heaven. He knew the perfect holiness of the divine nature. To take the form of servant and to become obedient to death on a cross is unmatched in history. How could He endure the hatred, the jealousy, the mocking, the unbelief, the sinfulness of humanity in bondage, and then the humiliation and the horrific prospect of bearing our sin on the cross? Only one way – by faith that looked to the joy that was set before Him, the promise that was before His eyes of joy – inconceivable joy! The joy of glorifying the Father by completing the work He gave Him alone to do, the joy of returning to heaven, triumphant over Satan sin, death, and hell, to the rejoicing of angels and to take His rightful place at the right hand of God the Father. The joy of giving sight to the blind, of making the lame to walk, of cleansing lepers, making the deaf to hear, raising the dead, and preaching the good news to the poor, and – praise God! – the joy of bringing

many sons and daughters to glory! Keeping that glorious joy in view enabled Jesus to endure the agony of the cross from beginning to end.

Jesus, as founder and perfecter, Jesus as our example is just what we need. And just to make sure that we do not miss what he is saying, the writer of Hebrews exhorts us one more time saying, **“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (Hebrews 12:3, ESV)** The preacher shows a pastor’s heart. He knows, he has himself experienced that it is possible to be worn down, to grow weary, for faith to erode over time, for us to become tempted to believe that the cost is too much, to grow weary and faint-hearted, not in an instant, but over time with a gradual slackening of our resolve. I have been there; I know you have too. But consider Jesus. He endured the jeers, the taunts, the betrayals, the floggings, the enticement to an easier way – from Satan and from His friends – and ultimately He endured crucifixion by sinful men with no legitimate cause. His life is the supreme witness of a life of committed faith expressed through faithful and trusting endurance and submission to God the Father. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Consider Him. Consider His person as the Lord of Glory, the second person of the Trinity, the Beloved of the Father, the Creator and Sustainer of Heaven and Earth. Consider His steadfast love and mercy. Consider His righteousness and justice. Consider His passion to rescue to Himself a bride. Consider His devotion to glorify His Father and fulfill His will through the plan of redemption. Consider His awesome condescension to take upon Himself flesh. Consider His power to work miracles, to supply our need, and release captives from the stronghold of sin. Consider His willingness to be devoted to the altar of sacrifice, the cross, so that we could be rescued from the wages of sin and the wrath of the Father. Consider His perfect law-fulfilling life by which He is able to give us His very own righteousness. Consider His glorious resurrection for our justification and ascension to the right hand of the Father that He might continually intercede for us. Consider His return to put all things under His feet as Savior and master and Lord. The more we consider Christ, the more we calculate His incomparable worth, the more we will have faith in Jesus and the more that faith possesses our hearts, the stronger our love becomes and the more our joy is filled up by the Work of God’s Spirit in our souls, steeling our backbones and strengthening our resolve to live to the praise of His glory.

Take heart beloved, you can win the race, so run! Run looking to and relying on Jesus for the strength and hope that you need to win. Run with the joy of eternal life and heaven, of eternal glory and joy with Christ ever before your face. Run with confident hope that God will supply your every need out of the riches of His grace in glory. Do not grumble, do not

fear, do not fret, do not be downcast, but run with you faces upturned to the Lord. Run with heart that says with the Psalmist: ***“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together! I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”*** (Psalm 34:1–5, ESV) Run and, beloved,

Run With Purpose I want you leave you this morning with a practical consideration when it comes to running this race. There is a program today that offers the possibility and plan of how to go from the couch to running a 5K. We have a plan for everything important – or we should – getting in shape, building a house, having a good marriage, raising our kids, teaching a lesson, budgeting our money. I want to encourage you to have a plan for running the race with Christ.

New Year is fast approaching, the time for making resolutions that we seldom keep, so I want to encourage you to do something that is valuable and worthwhile. Between now and New Year’s Day, take a day or an afternoon or a morning, and get away from everything – your phone, your computer, the TV, Spotify, social media – and take your Bible and a pad of paper and plan your run in the New Year with Jesus. Take that pad of paper and identify your besetting and entangling sins, identify the weights that burden you in your pursuit of Christ and in the race of faith and write them down, that get in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and greater patience and greater self-control. Then search the Scriptures for the promises of God that come to those with faith – the promises of God that can destroy sins and dismantle obstacles.

And then, in the words of John Piper, “When you have made all these notations, pray your way through to a resolve and a pattern of dismantling these encumbrances, and resisting these sins, and breaking old, old habits. And don't rise up against the Bible at this point and say, "I can't change." It is an assault on God if you read Hebrews 12:1 and go away saying: "It can't happen. Hindrances can't be removed. Sins can't be laid aside." God has not spoken this command for nothing. And this entire book is written to undergird these practical commands. So go back and read the book and ask God to take all the glorious truth that is here (about the superiority of Christ, and the power of his death and resurrection, and the effectiveness of his intercession for you) and make this truth explosive with life-changing

power. Carry some of the story to your small group and get them to pray for you. Find someone you trust and ask them to check in with you and support you... Don't drift from this moment into this Sunday afternoon. Before this day is over choose a day or a half-day and get away to plan your run with Jesus.”

But, you cannot run the race if you've never entered it and maybe that is where some of you need to begin today. Are you in the race? Put your hope and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and enter the race that ends in heaven and do it today.

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