



Hebrews 12:1-3
 Hebrews: Seeing Jesus Clearly
 “Run the Race”

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Today we end the series on Hebrews we’ve been in the last couple months. Next week we begin a new series on the Old Testament book of Daniel that will take us into June. Briefly looking ahead to that: **Daniel is one of the most dramatically vivid and theologically rich books in the Old Testament.** It spans two very different genres: narrative historical stories such as the lions’ den and fiery furnace and apocalyptic visions that New Testament writers and Jesus himself draw on. So, no two weeks in this series will feel the same. At its center is Daniel, a faithful servant of God living in a culture that is at odds with his faith, which makes the book resonate deeply even though the events of Daniel are from some 2600 years ago.

But before we get there, we close out Hebrews. Over the past several weeks, we’ve been working our way through this letter written to a community of believers who were tempted to walk away from Jesus and return to their old ways. The author’s answer is not a pep talk but a vision and an invitation: look at who Jesus actually is. See him clearly. He’s greater than the prophets who came before him. Greater than Moses. He’s our great high priest who is not distant from our weakness but has entered into it – and who offered himself as the once and for all sacrifice that accomplished what every previous offering could only point toward. So, trust him. Put your faith in him. Whatever else you are tempted to turn to, Jesus is better. That’s what Hebrews says.

And now, in chapter 12, we come to the only conclusion that argument allows: to run. Run the race of faith with all you’ve got even as Jesus has paved the way and runs with you. This morning we are reading **Hebrews 12:1-3**. Besides the rest of chapter 12, Hebrews has one more to go – but the rest flows out of today’s verses, continuing the theme of “living the faith well.” This is God’s word to you and me today...

Once again, we have a “Therefore.” This is the 3rd or 4th time we’ve encountered a “therefore” in this series. The word is used about a dozen times

in Hebrews, and here it is actually a different Greek word than we've seen before, giving some weight and emphasis to this occurrence. This "therefore" marks a turning point that builds on our Easter Sunday passage. You'll recall in Hebrews 10:22-24 there are several "let us" statements made. They are invitations and exhortations to draw near to God and live by faith. Today's "therefore" expands on those "let us" statements, encouraging us to live out our faith.

Then we get this phrase "...since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." (Hebrews 12:1). This connects to what comes immediately before: The "Faith Hall of Fame" in chapter 11 that Betty preached on last week. All these people from the Old Testament who lived by faith, who never saw the promise of God fully fulfilled because they preceded Jesus – they are, in a sense, with us. Not literally, but in a spiritual sense: we read about them, are inspired by them, and recognize they trusted the same God of the universe we trust. They are on the same journey. So, they are examples of faith, the very thing Hebrews is calling us to.

Then come the "let us" statement much like we saw on Easter: **"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" (Hebrews 12:1).** If you've ever watched a track meet, you've likely noticed the athletes warm up in extra layers of clothes to keep their muscles warm and ready for their event. But when the time comes to compete, those outer layers come off. Otherwise, they would slow the runner down.

That's the picture here. It's a deliberate, willful act to shed "everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." Whatever it is that prevents us from living by faith, we are to shed it. What is holding you back from freely following Jesus? It might be sin, it might be something more legitimate that has simply become a weight. Either way – let it go.

And then we're called to run with perseverance. **Perseverance is the characteristic of faith that is needed when faith meets resistance.** Like when there's a temptation to go back to old ways of living, old habits, old

addictions, old idols, old questions. We live in a culture that constantly says, “There is no God;” “This life is all there is;” “Being a good person is enough.” Unexpected events and tragedies happen that cause us to question God’s presence, his faithfulness, and his goodness. And while we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who encourage us, there is also a great cloud of uncertainty that seeks to pull us away from faith in Jesus.

Hebrews calls us to persevere – to actively push through. You may have seen the headlines a couple weeks ago or so that the pioneering mountaineer and Washingtonian, Jim Whittaker, died at age 97. He was the first American to make it to the summit of Mt. Everest, in 1962. Some who were supposed to be at the top with the group turned back in the final stages of the climb as a storm came in. Jim and those who pushed through made it. That is perseverance.

This is the virtue of our faith most needed when faith meets suffering or other resistance. I think there is a caution for us to keep in mind with this race metaphor, because we naturally think of a race as an individual effort. Not that there aren’t team races...but primarily races are individual competitions.

But we need people here and now to help us persevere. Hebrews gives us inspiration with this great cloud of witnesses in chapter 11 who have gone before; but we need more. That’s not to take anything away from the people in the list; it’s just a reality, and it’s how God has built us. We need people here today, with us in our faith. Our faith needs community. You need community.

I have an occasional recurring dream, though it has been probably 15 years since the last one. In this dream I’m trying to run – like in a race, or on the soccer field. But my legs won’t work right. I’m pushing with all my might and using every ounce of energy my legs can muster, but they will only move slowly. Inevitably, I cry out in my frustration, and sometimes I carry that out physically in bed. I’ll cry out and even begin moving my legs, kicking Gwen in my sleep. Whether she’s kicked or she hears me cry out, she wakes up, wakes me, asks about my dream, comforts me and reminds me it’s just a dream, and then politely tells me to go sleep on the couch so she can sleep

without fear of being kicked! Ok, not that last part. I made that up. But everything else is true: she helps me in that moment to get out of my bad dream of being unable to run.

We need that kind of help in our faith. **We need brothers and sisters in Christ who know us deeply, who will encourage us, walk with us, and pray for us.** It's why we need Christian community – relationships where we can share the hard stuff in life and know that we're not running alone: being together on Sunday mornings, in small groups, in micro groups, serving together in ministry. So, we're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – including in the generation running alongside us right now. And this gives you the opportunity to be part of the great cloud of witnesses for someone else, and encourage them to persevere in their faith.

But as great as all those other people are who are listed in chapter 11 and who encourage us in our faith today: **The one who's leading us, the one we follow and fix our eyes on is Jesus.** The Greek word translated “fix our eyes on” more literally means “look away to”. In other words, look *away* from one thing and look *to* Jesus. Look away from sin, materialism, consumerism, pride, and the ways of the world, and look to Jesus. I think of racehorses with blinders on. They help the horse maintain its focus on where it's going. No distraction by what's in their peripheral vision.

We want to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus because he's the one who is, as verse 2 goes on to say, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” He makes the way forward for us through his death and resurrection. And even when we fall short, he's the one who perfects our faith. He makes sure we cross the finish line and join him in the victory circle with the gold medal of rest and eternal salvation hung around our necks.

It's that eternal resting place, the gift of eternal life, that, gives us joy and motivates us to persevere, just as it did for Jesus when he endured the cross. This passage tells us that it was for joy and by the power of future joy that he endured the cross: The joy of making a way for us; The joy of pleasing his heavenly father; The joy of sitting at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus shows us that following God’s plan is not one of avoiding suffering but enduring suffering in light of a future joy.

And so the passage moves us from this great cloud of witnesses who persevered in their faith to point us finally to Jesus. **As verse 3 says, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Jesus is our ultimate inspiration.** And a couple Sundays removed from Resurrection Day, we should keep in mind that this inspiration is also and more fully an *assurance* of life on the other side of death.

The cultural pushback against our beliefs, and every temptation to turn back to old ways, has all been overcome by Jesus, because Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) **The joy of the empty tomb and Jesus’ resurrection remind us that following Jesus is worth it.**

Persevering is worth it.

Keeping our eyes fixed on him is worth it.

Letting go of worldly stuff is worth it.

Adopting Biblical values is worth it.

The prize on the other side of the grave is worth it, and that future joy brings us joy here and now.

At the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, the Tanzanian marathon runner John Stephen Akhwari fell and dislocated his knee around the midpoint of the race. More than an hour after the marathon winner crossed the line, Akhwari limped into the stadium – in last place – and he finished **(Photo)**. The medal ceremony for the event had already happened! Most of the crowd had left the stadium.



When Akhwari was asked why he didn’t quit, he famously said, “My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me to finish it.” It’s a powerful picture of perseverance, motivated by the joy of finishing, and surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – a whole nation – that was with him in spirit.

The Good News for us is that Jesus has crossed the finish line ahead of us. By his death and resurrection, we too will cross that same finish line when we trust in him, keep our eyes fixed on him, persevere through the challenges, and run the race with joy and with one another. We do this

because as Hebrews tells us:

Jesus is our great high priest.

He became one of us.

He's greater than Moses.

He's the once-for-all sacrifice.

He has made a better covenant.

He was raised from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the throne of majesty in heaven.

We are part of this great cloud of witnesses.

And therefore, we run this race of faith. Not so we would be put up on a pedestal or crowned as victors, but rather: we run it for the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so others would join in the race with us. Let us run the race of faith together, and let us run it well. Let's pray...Amen.