

FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS

Hebrews 12:1-29

Key Verse: 12:2

“...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

In chapter 10 the author encouraged Hebrew believers, in the midst of hardship and persecution, to live by faith and not shrink back. In chapter 11 he gave many examples of people who persevered in faith to the end. They looked forward to the Messiah. They were all commended by God for their faith, even though they did not receive what was promised in their lifetime. Now, in chapter 12, the author explains what it means to live by faith for the Hebrew believers. In verses 1-3, he compares living by faith to running a race. It is not a sprint for a few weeks or months, but a marathon lasting a lifetime. As we see in verses 4-17, hardships, persecutions and temptations arise in the course of running the race. So this race takes on the character of a steeplechase as well. In order to run such a race successfully, we need a strategy and the wisdom to deal with obstacles. Most of all, we need to fix our eyes on the goal. This is challenging for us today. We live in an age of aimless distractions. So many things clamor for our attention that we can easily lose sight of our goal. We can forget by evening what we had planned in the morning. We may be running, but where are we are going? We can become like the college football player, Roy Riegels, who ran the wrong way in the 1929 Rose Bowl and scored for the opposition. People still laugh about it. But not finishing the life of faith well is serious. Let's listen to the author of Hebrews teach us how to run our race of faith victoriously to the end.

First, let us run with perseverance (1-3). One of the most challenging things for a runner to deal with is loneliness. Likewise, we Christians can feel very lonely when no one seems to understand how hard we are struggling to live by faith. But as verse 1 reminds us, many have run this race before us. We are surrounded by a **“great cloud of witnesses.”** The word “witness” is from the same Greek word as “martyr.” These are witnesses for Christ, not spectators. They pleased God with their faith and entered his glory. They testify that the life of faith is the way of victory. Whenever we are lonely or discouraged, it is good to remember them. As we do, we can find inspiration and enjoy a fellowship that transcends time and space.

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When runners prepare for a race they throw off everything that hinders them. They want to be as light and fast as possible, making the most efficient use of their energy. They control their diet. They do not wear thick uniforms, heavy shoes or many kinds of jewelry. We should have the same attitude in running the race of faith. The author says, “...**let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles**” (1). Some people want to run, but their spirits are weighed down by a legalistic mindset, temptation to pleasure, or conflicts with other believers, or persecutions from without. Especially sin so easily entangles. This includes lusts, pride, jealousy, an unforgiving heart, selfish ambition, and particularly the unbelief that leads to apostasy. The author has warned repeatedly not to be hardened by a sinful, unbelieving heart (3:12-13). When we face difficulties, we easily fall into doubt and fear that leads us to be unbelieving. Unbelief destroys not only one’s relationship with God, but relationships between people. Sin is not to be taken lightly. Once entangled, it is hard to escape. The nature of sin can be compared to a spider’s web. It has sticking power to entangle unsuspecting flies and trap them. Webs of many kinds of sin are scattered everywhere. We should be aware of the power of sin and throw it off immediately, like Joseph, who ran away from Potiphar’s wife.

After being freed from hindrances, we must run. Verse 1b says, “**And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us....**” Running is not the same as jogging or strolling. It is committing all of one’s energy to attain the goal with a sense of urgency. Yet this is not a short sprint, but a distance race, so perseverance is required. Most people start the race energetically, but after some time they become weary. They are tempted to lose heart and give up. But those who give up in the middle get no credit. They are marked by the letters “DNF” which means “Did Not Finish.” It is not so serious to get a “DNF” in a 10K race, but to do so in the Christian race is very serious. Jesus said: “**By your endurance, you will gain your lives**” (Lk 21:19, ESV). We need to persevere to the end as a matter of life and death. Perseverance is not passive; it is the power that resists hindrances. This does not come from ourselves; it comes from God through prayer, meditating on his words and obedience. Perseverance grows as we go through trials and sufferings by depending on God (Ro 5:3). With the strength that God gives, we can be like a living fish swimming upstream, not a dead fish floating downstream.

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In any race, the goal is important. Without seeing the goal, we run aimlessly. In the Christian race of faith our goal is Jesus and his kingdom. So we have to fix our eyes on Jesus. Verse 2a says, “**...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.**” Then what does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? It means to see everything in Jesus, with Jesus, through Jesus, and from Jesus’ point of view. In the time of blessing, the time of adversity, or when we have a conflict, we should try to understand what Jesus wants us to do. One young woman really wanted to grow in faith and be a better servant of Christ. But in the course of trying to do so, she had a conflict with her mentor. She was advised her to fix her eyes on Jesus and try to understand everything from Jesus’ point of view. When she did, she was free from human struggling, could learn valuable lessons and grow in faith. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, the dimensions of our perspective greatly enlarge. We can see how to respond to issues in a way that helps us grow and become a blessing to others. On the other hand, if we don’t fix our eyes on Jesus, we just get stuck and suffer from irritation and anxiety and become a burden to others. Whenever I am bothered by something or someone, I cannot get out of it by my own effort. Then the race seems very hard. But when I fix my eyes on Jesus, he gives freedom and peace, and I can run with perseverance.

Why do we need to fix our eyes on Jesus? It is because Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus came into the world obeying God’s will for the salvation of mankind. Though he is the Son of God, he learned obedience from what he suffered, even to death on the cross. Once made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for those who obey him (Heb 5:8-9). Though we are imperfect and flawed, when we fix our eyes on Jesus, he transforms us to be more and more like him, until we are perfect. Jesus is the source of our salvation. Moreover, Jesus ran the race of faith perfectly. So he is the perfect model of faith. Let’s consider how Jesus ran his race to the end. Verse 2b says, “**For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**” The cross of Christ represents the greatest suffering in history. Jesus not only suffered physically, but also experienced God’s righteous wrath when he took upon himself the sin of the world. He was crucified publicly, bearing great shame, not to mention pain. Usually people whose sins are exposed feel very shameful and cover their faces. But Jesus is different. Jesus disregarded the shame of the cross because he is sinless. There is no hint of

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shame or defeat in Jesus at the cross. Rather, Jesus manifested grace, forgiveness and victory. Jesus endured the cross to the end and died, bearing all our sins. Then God raised him from the dead and exalted him to his own right hand in eternal glory. Now Jesus reigns as King of kings. The author exhorts us to **“consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that we may not grow weary and lose heart”** (3). “Consider” means to think about carefully. Whenever we consider how Jesus overcame trials and sufferings that are more intense than ours, we find the strength to persevere. When we think about Jesus deeply, we can be full of Spirit, overcoming weariness. So instead of thinking about our trials and sufferings, we should think about Jesus.

Second, endure hardship as discipline (4-13). In the course of running our race, hardships arise. How we deal with these is crucial. Verse 4 says, **“In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”** Hebrew believers were weary and tired and were losing heart in their ongoing struggle against sin. It seems that they needed comfort and encouragement. However, the author did not sympathize with them. He urged them to struggle to the point of shedding their blood and become martyrs. Jesus urges us, **“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown”** (Rev 2:10b). In “Pilgrim’s Progress,” when Christian met the dreadful enemy Apollyon, he was so scared that he was tempted to turn around and retreat. Then he remembered that he had no armor for his back and would be vulnerable. So he pressed forward and fought by faith. Then Apollyon ran away.¹ In our struggle against sin we should never retreat or surrender, but press forward by faith. When we resist the devil, he flees from us (Ja 4:7b).

When we are running hard and overcoming obstacles, we might wish to receive recognition and praise. Instead, we may be rebuked and trained even harder. How should we respond? The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12: **“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son”** (5b-6). There are two wrong attitudes to watch out for. One is taking God’s discipline lightly and the other is losing heart. How can we avoid these? We should not think of hardship as

¹ http://www.covenantofgrace.com/pilgrims_progress_apollyon.htm

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punishment for sin, or a random accident, but as God's discipline for the children he loves (7). We tend to think, "God does not love me. That is why this is happening." But we should think, "God loves me. That is why this is happening." Then we can find the meaning of our hardships and can have a right attitude toward them. Whether it be serious illness, financial trial, family trouble, relationship problems, or natural disaster, our first thought should be, **"God works for the good"** (Ro 8:28). After we endure for a little while, God will bless us. Most of all, he will purify our faith and conform us to the likeness of Jesus (Ro 8:29; 1Pe 1:6-7).

As God disciplines us in love throughout our lifetimes, it is important for us to have a right attitude toward him who disciplines us. We should realize that God disciplines us like a father disciplines his own children. Otherwise, we would be like illegitimate children (8). When our human fathers discipline us, we submit to it and respect them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live (9). Good fathers do their best for their children, but they are limited. But God is the perfect Father. He always has the best plan for us and is unlimited in his wisdom and power to carry it out. God's discipline never fails to produce the good that he wants; it is that we may share in his holiness, which is an eternal blessing (10). No one enjoys receiving discipline; it is unpleasant; it is painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (11). Job lost all of his children and wealth in a day, was afflicted with terrible disease and was rebuked by his wife. But he never doubted God's love or abandoned his integrity as a man of faith. He confessed: **"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised...Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?"** (Job 1:21; 2:10). Once, when King David was fleeing from his son Absalom, Shimei cursed him: **"Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel!"** Then Abishai said to David, **"Let me go over and cut off his head."** David responded, **"Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today"** (2Sa 16:7-12). David accepted Shimei's curse as God's discipline. In this way he could grow as a man after God's own heart. So the author exhorts us to receive God's discipline: **"Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed"** (12-13).

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Third, let us be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe (14-29). To be sure, it is difficult and challenging to run the race of faith to the end. But there are two great blessings we enjoy along the way: fellowship in the Christian community and worshiping God. Verses 14-17 are ethical teachings to guide the Christian community. This community is governed by the new covenant, sealed by the blood of Jesus. In contrast, the Old Testament believers were governed by the old covenant, sealed by animals' blood. The new covenant community was created by God and set apart from the world. It was not to be influenced by the world, but to influence the world with gospel truth. We should not try to manage this community by our own common sense or by worldly standards, but live in submission to God's word. In verse 14, the author encourages us to make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy. Peace comes from God through Jesus, who is our peace (Eph 2:14). Jesus destroyed the barriers between God and us and the barriers between people. As children of God, we should not be troublemakers, but peacemakers (Mt 5:9). In the course of being peacemakers, we should not compromise with sin. Rather, we should be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. How can we be holy? Only through Jesus' blood which brings forgiveness and purification (1Jn 1:9).

Verses 15-17 tell us how our community can live in peace and be holy. We need to watch ourselves and our community to see that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up (15). Once we were terrible sinners, but we are saved by God's grace alone. If we forget God's grace we become legalistic, judgmental and critical. This destroys community life. We must always remember God's grace and our community should be full of this grace. We should not allow bitterness to fester in our hearts, no matter what the reason is. Bitterness damages not only one's own character, but others as well, defiling the Christian community. We need to uproot bitterness in our hearts through repentance. Sexual immorality and godlessness are also cancers that destroy community life (16a). Because of these God's wrath is coming (Col 3:5-6). Esau lost God's blessing, not due to gross sin, but because he despised God's blessing (16b-17). We must treasure holiness and God's spiritual blessings in our community. Then God is pleased to bless our community with his presence.

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What does it look like for God to dwell among us? To help us understand, the author compares and contrasts Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion (18-24). When God came down on Mt. Sinai no one could approach him. If even an animal touched the mountain it had to be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, **“I am trembling with fear”** (18-21). Mt. Zion’s atmosphere is different. It is a joyful assembly. This is because of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, who sprinkles believers with his blood. When we come to Mt. Sinai we are condemned to death. But when we come to Mt. Zion we are made alive through the blood of Jesus. Let’s read verses 22-24: **“But you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”** Though the blessing of Mt. Zion is so gracious and wonderful, we need to respond to it with faith. Otherwise, we cannot escape God’s judgment in the last day (25-26). The created world will be shaken on the last day. What can be shaken will be removed. What remains is a kingdom that cannot be shaken (27-28a). This is our everlasting inheritance from God. This should move us to be thankful for God’s amazing grace. It inspires us to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (28c). God is the Judge of all, alone worthy of our worship (29).

We have an amazing eternal inheritance awaiting us. We have a perfect heavenly Father who guides us with love, discipline and blessings. Let’s run the race of faith with perseverance, fixing our eyes on Jesus.