

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

Hebrews 12:1-3

Key Verses: 12:2a

“...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

When we began 2020, we had bright hopes and plans. I was looking forward to our hosting the regional SBC and also traveling throughout Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan to serve native leaders. My wife and I also wanted to go out of state to visit our families. I made an annual plan accordingly, and I am sure that most of you did the same. However, God had a different plan. The Covid-19 pandemic came upon us and everything changed. We had to give up our plans and alter our lifestyles drastically. Now, millions have contracted the virus and hundreds of thousands have died--some of whom were close to us. Fear, anxiety, despair, and frustration filled the minds of people throughout our nation and the world. Strong disagreements broke out over how to respond to the pandemic. In addition, protests and racial riots erupted in major cities, and a contested presidential election exposed many evil things. The economy became so erratic that millions of people lost jobs. School closures forced children to engage in remote learning and caused many troubles. We had to stop in person worship and other regular meetings and could not visit campuses to meet students; we learned to do everything online. In brief, instead of enjoying the year we hoped for, we have been overwhelmed by unexpected hardships.

As we approach 2021, many are forecasting more of the same and say that this winter will be very, very dark. The future is uncertain. Most have put hope in the vaccines that are coming out. However, who knows whether a more serious calamity will come next, as we saw the series of God's judgments poured out in Revelation? Moreover, the pandemic has changed the world permanently; there is no going back to the way things were before. As Jesus prophesied in his signs of the end of the age, the world gets worse and worse. In such a world, there is no hope. What should we do at this moment? As I was overwhelmed by all the issues we are facing, one Bible verse came to my mind: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus” (1984 NIV). When I

thought of Jesus, all the darkness melted away and a bright heavenly hope filled my heart. That is why I chose this as our key verse for 2021. Let us consider what fixing our eyes on Jesus means, and how this can guide us to run our race of faith in 2021.

First, run the race of faith with perseverance (1-2). The Bible gives us many metaphors to describe Christians: soldiers of Christ, pilgrims to God's kingdom, the bride of Christ. In this passage, the author uses the analogy of runners in a race to describe how we should live by faith--as the heroes of faith in chapter 11 did. Verses 1-2a say, "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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Here we can learn how the life of faith is like running a race. When did you last run? This morning? Six months ago? Six years ago? Let us consider some key words that teach us how to run successfully.

- One key word is "witnesses." The author said we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Sometimes we feel lonely when we are running. But actually we are not alone. We are surrounded by numerous heroes of faith who have finished their race. These "witnesses" are not just spectators but were participants who gave their lives to run the race to the end. They testify that running the race of faith in Jesus is the way of true victory. They give us assurance that we are on the right track and encourage us to keep running. They speak to us through the pages of Scripture and throughout history. When we realize that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we can overcome the temptation to give up and keep on running.

- A second key word is "hinders." When runners prepare for a race they try to make themselves as light as possible. They wear the least amount of clothing, even using aerodynamically designed garments. More importantly, they should control their body weight through intense self-discipline. They try to remove any hindrance that will slow them down. What are hindrances in running the race of faith? One is a legalistic mindset which leads to a performance-- oriented lifestyle. We may measure our performance by making a list of dos and don'ts. If we keep them well, we

become self-righteous and judgmental toward others. If we do not, we blame ourselves and burden others. We should remember that Christians live a gospel-centered life: by faith in Jesus alone, and grace alone, clothed in Jesus' righteousness as our running clothes. This sets our hearts free to love and serve others. We can run the race joyfully.

Another hindrance may be the distractions that make us busy-minded. In his book, "The Purpose Driven Life," Pastor Rick Warren says, "Most men lead lives of aimless distractions." We have many things to do every day in work, school and family life. When we have a little time, we may watch Youtube videos, go on Facebook, or browse the Internet. Then we become so distracted that we fail to read the Bible or pray. We become weary and exhausted and even forget that we are in a race of faith. At such moments, we need to listen to God's word and pray.

The most serious hindrance is the sin that so easily entangles. This may be pride, greed, envy, lust, selfish ambition, self-glory seeking, or an unforgiving heart among other things. Most serious is the sin of unbelief that leads to apostasy (3:12-13). Unbelief arises when we face difficulties and fall into doubt and fear. Once we are entangled with sin, it is hard to escape from it. What can we do about hindrances and sin? The author exhorts us to throw them off. The word "throw off" means to "lay aside," to "stop," or to "cease." If we continue these things, we will face serious consequences. So we should stop and change our lifestyle. Though we must try hard, this cannot be done solely by our own effort. We need Jesus. When we come to Jesus, he will surely help us. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

- "Perseverance" is another key word. The race of faith is not a 100-meter dash. It is more like a marathon; it is a lifelong race that requires perseverance to finish well. Just as starting well is important, so is finishing well. Running the race of faith to the end is not easy; there are challenges and trials that seem impossible to overcome and we feel like giving up. This is why perseverance is necessary. Perseverance is not passive; it is inner strength like that of a fish which swims against the current. This inner

strength is not built up in a day. It can be developed through practicing spiritual disciplines, such as regular times of morning devotion, prayer, Bible study and fellowship with brothers and sisters. For example, the prophet Daniel faced an incredibly challenging situation at a young age. He was taken as a prisoner of war to a foreign country with a different language and an ungodly culture. From the beginning, he firmly decided not to compromise with the pagan culture (Da 1:8). He had prayer fellowship with three godly friends (2:17-18). He studied the Bible regularly with an earnest desire to know God and his will (9:2). He prayed three times a day, kneeling down privately in his house, even when threatened with death (6:10). He did all these things while diligently carrying out his duties as one of the top administrators of a world power nation. In the course of his life Daniel faced impossible challenges. But by holding onto God's grace through spiritual disciplines, he ran the race of faith with perseverance to the end. His life of faith still shines like a bright heavenly star (12:3).

- A final key word to consider is "goal." Verse 1c says, "the race marked out for us." Our race starts when we are born and finishes when we die. We did not choose this race, God marked out our course for us. Our job is to run. As we run, knowing the goal is important. Otherwise, we may run in vain. If we had many lives, we could experiment with various goals. But we just have one life, so it is extremely important to set a clear life goal as early as we can. This requires commitment. That is why many people hesitate to set a life goal. However, to run our race of faith well, we must have the goal clearly in mind. Our goal is not the grave. Our goal is Jesus and his kingdom.

Verse 2a says, "...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..." The word "fixing" means to keep thinking about, without having one's attention distracted. Thoughts come and go in our minds constantly. According to psychology researchers at Queens University in Canada, an average person has over 6,000 thoughts per day.¹ What kind of thoughts we have makes a great difference. If we have evil thoughts, we will become negative, dark, and nasty. Then evil actions will follow. If we have godly thoughts, we will be hopeful, joyful, and loving. Good deeds will follow. This

¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/humans-6000-thoughts-every-day>

is why we must fix our eyes on Jesus. This does not happen naturally; intentional effort is required. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, he will rule over our hearts. We can grow to be like Jesus, bearing fruit of the Spirit.

The author tells us that Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” This reveals how Jesus ran the race of faith to carry out God’s plan of world salvation. To understand this verse, we need to review an earlier passage in Hebrews, which contrasts the old covenant and the new covenant (8:1 ff). When Adam disobeyed God’s word, human beings’ relationship with God was broken and the way to God was closed. But in his great mercy, God made a way for humankind to come to him. It was through the sacrifice of animals and by living according to God’s law. This was the old covenant. But God found fault with the people because they could not keep the law due to their weaknesses. So God made a new covenant in which he forgave their sins unconditionally and put his laws in their minds and wrote them on their hearts. It means they were transformed from within and able to live before God. To activate this new covenant, a perfect sacrifice was required. Animal sacrifice was insufficient; it had to be a sinless human being (Heb 8:7-13). But there was no sinless human being. The only one worthy was Jesus, the sinless Son of God. Jesus knew God’s heart and said, “Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll--I have come to do your will my God” (Heb 10:7). That is why Jesus came into the world and lived among us.

Though Jesus is the Almighty God, he did not come to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45). Jesus humbled himself and cared for sinners with great love. He diligently taught the word of God to people who were thirsty for the truth. He opened the kingdom of God and planted living hope in the hearts of despairing people. He was wounded to heal us. He bore all our weaknesses and sins in his body and died on a cross. Verse 2b tells how he finished his race: “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame....” The cross is a symbol of pain, shame, suffering, death. Jesus endured this cross for the joy set before him in accomplishing God’s salvation plan.

Just before death, Jesus said, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). This means that he fulfilled God’s salvation work completely. Then God raised him from the

dead. He ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (2c). Now Jesus is Sovereign Ruler of all things. Once made perfect, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for those who obey him (Heb 5:8-9). Jesus is the way that we should follow. Jesus is the bread of life who nourishes our souls. Jesus is the light of the world who guides us in the truth. Jesus is the good Shepherd who protects us, cares for us, and leads us. Jesus is the resurrection and the life who opened the way for eternal life and glory. In a word, Jesus is everything to us. All we need to do is fix our eyes on Jesus. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, though we are imperfect and unholy, he transforms us to be more and more like him until we become perfect and enter his eternal heavenly kingdom.

Second, consider him. In verse 3, the author exhorts us, "Consider him, who endured such opposition from sinners, so that we may not grow weary and lose heart." We need to think about how Jesus endured opposition from sinners. Though Jesus is the Creator, when he came into this world in human flesh, he was not welcomed by his people. He became the object of criticism. When Jesus accepted sinners and ate with them, the religious leaders slandered him: "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Lk 7:34). When Jesus performed life-giving miracles by healing paralytics and driving out evil spirits, they said: "Aren't we right in saying that you are...demon-possessed?" (Jn 8:48). They continually tried to trap Jesus in his words and deeds to have a basis to arrest and kill him. Finally they crucified him, branding him as a criminal who deserved the death sentence. Isaiah prophesied about him, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted" (Isa 53:3-4). When Jesus received such opposition, he did not hesitate or shrink back. Rather, he ran his race to the end. When we live a godly life in Christ Jesus, we will surely be persecuted (2Ti 3:12). We will face misunderstanding and rejection, slander, and intimidation. We can easily become discouraged, and lose heart, and be tempted to give up the race of faith. At these times, we should consider Jesus. To consider him means to think deeply and carefully about him. As we consider Jesus, we find that he can understand us and strengthen us. He fills

us with his Spirit and enables us to overcome weariness and run the race with vigor to the end.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus is not just a personal matter. It is something we must all do together. That is why the author of Hebrews repeats, "Let us." Though we overcome challenges personally, if our community or church atmosphere is dark, it is hard to keep running the race of faith. These days in our society we face a fierce spiritual battle. Forces of evil are at work to suppress the truth and disparage Christian faith by spreading many kinds of lies continually. With the power of money and social pressure they try to change our nation for their own selfish gain, not realizing they are being used by the evil one. As we studied in Revelation 13, the political and religious powers of the world are symbolized by two beasts, who are controlled by Satan. It seems that this prophecy is being fulfilled before our eyes. This causes many people to be discouraged. We are tempted to compromise with the evil power, and we lose heart to preach the gospel truth. But when we fix our eyes on Jesus, we find that he is the Sovereign Ruler who sits at the right hand of the throne of God. He will judge all evil powers and wicked people and reign in eternal glory. Those who believe in him will be rewarded with glorious victory. This gives us confidence to persevere amid all hardships. This enables us to preach the gospel courageously, raise disciples of Jesus, and send them out to the whole world. So let us not be swayed by the difficult situation but let us run the race of faith in 2021, fixing our eyes on Jesus! Amen!