

Jesus & Running the Race

Hebrews 12:1-2

Halifax: 18 February 2024

Introduction:

In our sermon series from Hebrews, we are starting Hebrews chapter 12 today.

- The first two verses are packed with a lot of material, so we will only cover them today.
- They introduce us to the theme that we will be following pretty much until we finish Hebrews. These last two chapters exhort us to press on to glory, looking to Jesus.

I will go ahead with our scripture reading now—Hebrews 12 verses 1 & 2.

- This is the Word of God:

Heb 12:1-2: Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

May the Lord grant us a clear understanding of what these words call us to do and may He fill us with His Spirit that we might be able to do it.

There are two exhortations here for us to consider.

- First, we are exhorted (or urged) to run with endurance the race that is marked out before us (verse 1).
- Second (verse 2), we are exhorted to do this by looking to Jesus. That is the only way we can run with success.

These two together are the primary exhortation of the book of Hebrews in a nutshell.

- We have seen that this book was written to Hebrew believers.
 - These Hebrews were Jews who had professed faith in Jesus, but some of them were thinking of turning back to Judaism.
- Because of their profession, they were ostracised by their fellow Jews and looked at them as backward and foolish—and ungodly.
 - They had forsaken the magnificent temple that was renowned all over the world, and they were regarded as disloyal and rebellious.
 - And for what? They were worshipping in small assemblies that gathered in peoples' homes. They had uneducated leaders who were fisherman and an ex-tax collector. They had no altar and no priest, they worshipped on Sunday instead of Saturday, and they claimed that the prophet who was rejected by the Sanhedrin and crucified on the cross was the Messiah.
 - To discourage the spread of this religion that was seen to be pestilent and blasphemous, these followers of Jesus the Nazarene were cut off from social intercourse, ridiculed, imprisoned, beaten, refused employment, boycotted, and excluded from family associations.

- Those who were doubting were growing sluggish in their faith, as people do when they are not sure if they will go on, and that was causing their souls to dry up and making them critical and discontent with the church.
- Some of them were in the brink of ruin.
 - That is why this epistle was written—
 - to exhort them to run the race that was set before them with endurance,
 - and to exhort them to do this looking unto Jesus...
 - It presents perhaps the fullest and most beautiful descriptions of Jesus and His saving work that we have in the Bible,
 - and it urges us to live in view of that.
- We will look first at the exhortation to run the race and then at the exhortation to run looking unto Jesus. We will begin with the first:

I. **“Run with endurance the race that is set before us.”**

- This is the primary exhortation of the book of Hebrews.

A. This is a call to run to God.

1. That is what all those faithful followers of the LORD catalogued in Hebrews chapter 11 had done.
 - The author refers to them as a great cloud of witnesses who surround us.
 - They are witnesses who testify that running to God—despite all kinds of difficulties—is by far the best course of action.
 - They still speak to us to this day, standing as witnesses that this is so.
 - Not one of them regretted the choice they had made, even when it led to deprivation, hardship, exclusion, or torture even to the point of death.
2. God, in His marvellous grace, has set this race before His people. He has given it to us as a race to run.
 - It is a call to sinners, which we all are, to run to Him.
 - Think of it—we, who are unworthy sinners, are called to set out to God’s house.
 - to take the road to His house in glory that we might be received into His house forever in heaven.
 - He calls us to come to Him and be warmly received when we get there.

B. This race is a race that we must continue to run until the end of our lives if we would get to God.

1. It is not a speed race, but a race of endurance.
 - It is called *running* because it requires strenuous effort—the word *endurance* or *perseverance* which we have run into before (Heb 10:36) suggests that.
 - Those who are victorious are the ones who endure to the end.
 - They are the ones who keep on going to God and do not turn away.
2. The great danger we face is the danger of turning off the pathway to Himself that the Lord has given us.
 - There are many who do this.
 - Jesus told the parable of the sower where you have some who turn away because of the hardships associated with following Him,

- And others who turn away because their heart is set on the world and what it has to offer instead on the LORD and what He has to offer.
 - As Jesus said, the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke out the word—their spiritual life and their communion with God is choked.
 - If you have been a Christian for long, you know that many do not endure.
 - Even many churches—whole denominations!—turn away from the Lord to walk no more with Him in the way He has set before us.
 - As Jesus once put it, few take the narrow way that leads to life. Most take the broad way into His kingdom that leads to destruction.
- C. There are many pressures and many tantalizing temptations, but the real cause of our ruin is within us.
1. Solomon said, “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.” (Prov 4:23)
 - Jesus taught that is not what goes into us from the outside that ruins us.
 - He said (see Mark 7:21-23): **“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²² thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”**
 - We like to pretend that these come from the outside—we like to blame it on influences or affliction or even problems with chemical imbalances in our brain, but the problem is with our own sinful heart.
 2. It is for this reason that our text here in Hebrews tells us to **“lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.”**
 - We have within us weights and sins that hinder us and cause us to slacken our pace. It may be that we have a love for ease or security; or that we nourish resentment and bitterness about our past. Maybe we are ungrateful and discontent—unhappy with what God has given us in this world—with our looks, our talents, our successes, our education, our wealth, our society, our friends, our spouse, our parents—
 - Or maybe we are teeming with lusts—sexual passions, perversions—
 - Or perhaps it is idolatry—we don’t want God to be quite so holy, or quite so sovereign, or quite so angry with sin as He is.
 - If we are going to endure, we must lay aside these weights and these sins.
 - If we try to carry them along, we will not be able to endure to the end.
 - We will not get to God.
 - We will show that our faith was not saving faith, but superficial faith.
 3. So what is important to you?
 - Your walk with God? Your communion with God? Getting to God? Your brothers and sisters in the church? Going on and on to God? Are you living for His glory?
 - Or do you have little regard for these things. Perhaps you have little regard for anything—you are a shrivelled-up soul who is withering away.

- Or perhaps you have regard for how you get on in this world. You are more passionate for pleasure or success or romance or pornography or security or impressing other people than you are for the things of God.
- If this is so, yours is a sorry state of affairs!
 - Think of the horror of turning away from God and meeting Him as an angry judge who will cast you into the Lake of Fire forever—when you might instead have come to Him to live in house forever in glory.

TRANS> If you can see that you are not running to God, just not able or not interested, I would like to show you how God's word tells you to do it.

- Yes, you have to lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares you and run with endurance the race that is set before you,
 - But there is only one way that you can do that successfully.
 - There is only one way to run that race so that you can make it to the end!

II. You must run the race looking to Jesus.

- Looking to Jesus is what Hebrews is all about.
 - It is about Jesus, the glorious redeemer that God has provided to save His people from their sins—Hebrews tells you to look to Him.
 - It doesn't even have an introduction—it begins by telling us that God has spoken to us by His Son whom He appointed as heir of all things.
 - And here in these concluding two chapters, it starts off with the call to run the race with endurance, looking unto Jesus!
 - I want to show you three ways that you are to look to Him.
- A. First, you must look to Him as the author and finisher of our faith.
 - He is the one who was sent to bring the whole church to God.
 1. Here is this great church that God called to run to Him.
 - But we are all ruined by sin—dead in our trespasses and sins.
 - We have no way, in ourselves, to break through the barrier that sin has put between us and God and come to Him.
 - We are cut off because of our sin and defilement.
 2. Yet, from the beginning, God promised that He would send us a champion.
 - A Son born to us who would redeem us.
 - A Son whose name would be Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.
 - He would break through the barrier that sin has put between us and God and open the way to God for us. He Himself would be the way for us to come into His house to live with Him forever.
 3. That is why He is called **the author and finisher of our faith**.
 - As the author and finisher of our faith, He is the one who made the way to God.
 - a. The *author* suggests that He was the pioneer... In Heb. 2:10, He was referred to as *the captain of our salvation*—*captain* is the same word as *author*.
 - It speaks of one who blazes a trail so that others can follow.
 - Later on in Hebrews, He is called the *forerunner* who has entered into the most holy place—not in the mere earthly temple—but the heavenly one.

- In other words, He is the one who made it all the way to God in glory.
 - That is the goal of the race—to go to God our Father—and He went as a forerunner—with the intention to bring us there too.
- b. Perhaps you can see from this why He is also called “the perfecter of our faith.”
- We have run into this word “perfect” over and over in Hebrews.
 - We have seen that it speaks of reaching the goal that God has for us as His people—the goal of coming to Him.
 - Jesus is the one who made it.
4. You can see how it tells us in verse 2 that He reached the goal.
- Look at the whole verse: **“looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”**
 - Do you see?
 - He got there! He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God in glory.
 - He broke through the barriers that sin had put between us and God, so now we can go to God by looking to Jesus.
 - If you try to come to God some other way, you will utterly fail.
 - Jesus is the only one who was able to get through, and His goal was to bring the whole church with Him—and that He does!
 - We run to God, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith—the one who made it to God and who brings the whole church to God.
 - Without Him, we have no way to come to God.
 - If you try to come some other way, you will be rejected.

TRANS> But this is not the only way we are to look to Him.

- B. Second, you must look to Jesus as your example of how to run to God.
- Before I explain that, some of you might have a question for me.
 - “You just said that we cannot come to God, but that we look to Jesus to bring us to God because He is the one who opened the way for us. Now you are saying that we still have to run to God. Which is it?”
 - That is a good question. I will try to answer it.
 - The running we do is not the same as the running that Jesus did.
 - His going to God was to bring the church that was guilty and lost in sin to God.
 - But even though we go with Him and go by His merit, we still must go!
 - Listen carefully—our running with endurance means that we run to God clinging to Jesus—looking to Him as the redeemer who saves us.
 - The enduring we must do is going to God by Jesus to the end of our days—with faith in Him as the one who opened the way for us to come to God.
 - If it were up to us to open the way, to pay for the sin, to change our sinful hearts, it would be hopeless—but we look to Him to do that!
 - We make it to God’s house, not by breaking through barrier of sin that separated us from God, but by trusting in Jesus until the end.

- So how does Jesus's example help us to run with endurance?
1. First, learn from Jesus that you must focus on the joy set before you.
 - That is how Jesus endured the cross.
 - In verse 2 it says, **“who, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross.”**
 - The “joy that was set before Him” was the joy Jesus had of bringing the whole church with Him into His Father’s house.
 - The prospect of bringing that about was so delightful to Jesus that it made Him willing to bear the cruel cross.
 - On the cross, He bore the shame and guilt of all of our sin before the Father—He was on the cross to be punished for our transgressions as we are taught in Isaiah 53.
 - Jesus, who hated sin so much that He never committed it in the least, was willing to bear the cross because the benefit of bringing us to the Father made it worth it.
 2. Those who do not endure do not focus on the joy of coming to the Father to live in His house.
 - I talked to you about how delightful the Father’s house is last week.
 - He is a Father who is a welcoming Father—a Father who is delighted to see us—a Father who sings for joy over us when we come to live with Him.
 - His is a house where we will see His excellent majesty and glory, His love and beauty, His power and wisdom.
 - It is a beautifully ordered home.
 - It is a place where there are pleasures forevermore.
 - We can’t even begin to imagine how glorious it will be...
 - We ought to consider it often as we run with endurance the race that is set out before us.
 - If we don’t have any regard for the prize, we will not run well.
 - Jesus ran well because He kept the glory of the Father to whom He was bringing the church always before His face.
 - Read the gospel of John and you will see how much He talked about it.
 - Learn from His example. Look to Him as you run.
- Now let’s look at the third way we ought to look to Jesus.
- The first was to look to Him as the author and finisher of our faith—the one who brings us to God.
 - The second was to look to Him as our example of how to run with endurance.
- C. Third, we should look to Jesus for strength to run with endurance to the Father.
1. We learned in Hebrews 4 & 5 that Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest who sympathises with us in our infirmities.
 - We learned that He was tempted in every way we are, yet without sin.
 - He knows how hard it is to be exhausted, and to be falsely accused, and to be charged with sin, and brought to bear the penalty of that sin before God.
 - He knows what it is to be rejected, to be physically abused and tortured.
 - But He does not look at us and say, “Well, I had it a lot worse than you.”
 - Jesus is not like that.

- He looks at us and He identifies with the pain and the suffering, and He has compassion on us because He remembers the struggle.
 - He sees us struggling to endure when we are plagued with trials and temptations, and He sees us sometimes giving in to them.
 - But as soon as we cry out to Him—indeed, often before that—He helps us.
 - If we look to Him for help, He finds our cries to be irresistible.
2. In Heb 7:25, we are told that as our merciful high priest, He ever lives to make intercession for us.
- We have a beautiful picture of this with Peter, when Peter denied Jesus. Jesus told Peter, “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.”
 - And though Peter sinned, his faith did not utterly fail like Judas’s did. It did not fail so that Peter ceased going on for God.
 - He did for a moment, but it was not a permanent apostasy because Jesus interceded for him.
 - When you have sinned, He is there with His sacrifice to pardon you.
 - Don’t stay away from Him because of pride or embarrassment.
 - Go to Him with your sin and find mercy.
 - He ever lives to make intercession.
 - You cannot lay aside those sins unless you confess them and are cleansed through faith in His blood.
 - You will not be able to run carrying those sins... you will soon start to doubt God and the next thing you know, you will be on the road to destruction instead of on the road to glory.
 - Run, looking unto Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing.

➤ Jesus is eager to help, but He does not wish to do it anonymously.

 - He wants you to come to Him looking for help so that you will love Him and trust Him and know that He is helping you.
 - That is why it is so important to look to Him as you run.

3. When Jesus left this world to go to the Father, He assured us that it would actually be better for us than to have Him here.

 - In John 14, He said that He would not leave us as orphans, but that He would send the Holy Spirit to help us.
 - He said that we would be able to ask the Father for things in His name and that the Father would hear us—not ask for just anything...
 - But when the prayer is about enduring through trials and temptations that you might continue to go to God without wavering,
 - You can be certain that He will hear your prayer.
 - Likewise, when you see the church struggling, or your brothers and sisters in the church, or your spouse—when you see them struggling to run the race with endurance,
 - Know look to Jesus to help the church, to help your brothers and sisters, to help your spouse or your children.
 - Look to Him for the grace and strength to go on and you will find mercy.

Conclusion:

So brothers and sisters, today we have seen the primary exhortation of Hebrews.

- Pages were devoted to set before us the superior saving work of Jesus who alone can bring us to God.
- And so here, in this last part of the book, we have the final exhortation to run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus...
 - As we move on through these last two chapters, we will look at what a life running to God with endurance looking to Jesus ought to look like.
 - Pray that God will bless us as we do that.