

# Following Hard After God

*Hebrews*

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**Bible Text:** Hebrews 12:1-4  
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Let's take our Bibles this morning and turn to Hebrews 12. This morning we're going to be looking at verses 3 and 4 but I want to read from verse 1 to remind us where we have come from and to put it in context.

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, 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, 2 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. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Our author as he's described the Christian life, that is what it means to live a life of faith, that's the way he's described it in that great chapter 11 in which he is citing some of the great saints of old who have run the race before us and finished the course, he has described that life as a great endeavor, and here in these opening words of chapter 12, he specifically uses the analogy of a great race, a marathon. In the process of living this life of faith, in the process of running this race which is a movement towards God, that is what the Christian life is, a movement towards God as the goal, the destiny towards which we move, on the way to God, we find ourselves encompassed around by all kinds of trials and difficulties and obstacles and we are required to endure. The old word is "persevere." Keep keeping on is a way of describing what it means. He's already in verses 1 and 2 told us to keep keeping on, keep persevering in this Christian race by turning our eyes away from all other objects and focusing them on Jesus, the one who's run ahead of us, the one who has finished the race, the one who has obtained the prize that lay before him. We're to keep our eyes on him.

And by using the name Jesus, of course, the author is reminding us of the humanity of Christ. In chapter 2 really of this great letter, he's reminding us that he for a little while was made lower than the angels, he took on our flesh and our blood and our human nature. He was embodied, he was incarnate, and he ran the race as a fully human person.

We need to remind ourselves of that. When we think in kind of ethereal terms about Jesus, that we are missing this great point that the author is making here. In chapter 2, verse 10, the author tells us that it was fitting for God that who was leading many sons, many people to glory, to make perfect the pioneer of their salvation through suffering.

So when we think of the name Jesus, we are to think of him both as our Savior and as our brother. We think of him as our Savior and that underscores the uniqueness of his life and the uniqueness of his work, but when we think of him as our brother, that is, one who shares the family likeness and the family nature and the family genes, when we think of the fact that from one man God created all the nations of men so ultimately we are all brothers and sisters in sharing the same human nature, and Jesus by taking on human nature became our brother and that reminds us of something that we have in common with him, and therefore the reason why we can look to Jesus as our example and we can follow him. In these verses, as our Savior he endured the cross. That was unique to him. On the cross he was bearing our sins. On the cross he was taking our place. On the cross he was dying for us. On the cross he is accomplishing your ultimate salvation and mine. He's ensuring by his work on the cross that we will at the end of the journey see God.

As our brother, Jesus endured. That's the word that's used twice. He endured the cross. The cross is a place of pain. The physical dimensions of the cross and Jesus' death on the cross are horrific beyond all imagination. But the stress of the text is on the repetition of this word "to endure; to persevere." He endured the cross. Why did he do that? Because he saw the goal. He saw the goal was your salvation and mine. That was his aim and so therefore he undergoes the pressure and the pain and the shame of the cross in order to secure your salvation and my salvation.

How did he endure it? Well, he endured it because he looked to God for the praise. He looked to God for the honor and the glory. He did not regard himself as being in the court of public opinion, "What do people think?" He endured the shame, the ridicule. He endured the opposition of people against him, the disgrace involved in dying on a cross, the rejection involved in being placed upon a cross. He endured that because his eye was to the goal and the goal was to bring many people in this room with him into glory. That's what kept Jesus going, the joy that was set before him was taking many children with him into the glory that he would enjoy.

But you see, the Bible is very very realistic. Here the Scripture, the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scripture, the ultimate author of the Scripture, knows that the Christian life can be and will probably be for many people in this room and watching by webcast, a very difficult thing, that it's not easy. You see, there are two words in this text of ours today in verse 3 that I want us to begin to look at and then to look at the cure. These words are "weary" and "fainthearted," we might translate them "discouraged" and "dispirited." Maybe you find yourself in church this morning and you are feeling a bit discouraged, maybe you're here this morning and you're dispirited. Holy Scripture has something to say to you this morning. The Holy Spirit has something to say to you this morning and I want you to walk through it with me. There is something to avoid, something to watch, and something to consider.

There is something to avoid. The great danger for you and me as Christian people is to be weary. That first word, that is a dangerous word. It describes a kind of spiritual fatigue. Now though I use the word spiritual, let's be realistic, we have spirits and we operate as people at the spiritual realm because we're Christians who have been made alive by the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit has given us spiritual desires and instincts and tastes, but what it means to be weary will often manifest itself in mental, psychological or physiological symptoms. We cannot distinguish something spiritual from these other elements of the totality of what we are because we're embodied creatures.

This word "weary" means "to be worn out," worn out perhaps at all of those levels: spiritually, mentally, psychologically, even physically. And the key verse to help us understand what's going on in this word is in Revelation 2:3. Here the Lord Jesus is addressing the church at Ephesus, he says this to the church at Ephesus, "I know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and that you have not grown weary." Now do you see what it means to be weary in this text that teaches us what the weariness looks like? Weariness spiritually means that we are no longer enduring patiently and we are no longer bearing up, rather we're not enduring at all, we've stopped enduring. Perhaps we're impatient. Perhaps we're not bearing up. We're being brought down by life and by our circumstances. We're not keeping going, persevering in suffering. Service for Jesus has become a burden. The idea of living the Christian life has become a weight that we carry, it's as if we're bent over carrying this weight of responsibility and we're weary of it. We're discouraged. We wake up every morning and we read the newspapers and we see what's wrong with the world and we think to ourselves, "Why isn't God doing something?" We look at the television and we see murder and warfare and famine and we think, "Why is the world going on like this? Is there no break to all of this?" We look at the church, 70% of evangelical Christians in America think that Jesus was the first created being, and we think they can't even get God right and we're discouraged. Or you've been to a church where there's been a church fight and you're discouraged. Or you realize that the church you go to is not perfect and you're discouraged. And the danger, of course, is that this spiritual weariness may lead to you becoming overwhelmed by these things. It may mean that you're tripped up by these things. It could lead you into a place where you have a state of mind, a settled state of mind in which you have lost life and heart and energy and usefulness and even care anymore about the things of God. This weariness is a huge issue. Maybe you're on the verge of it today. Maybe you know someone who's on the verge of it today, who's finding the resistance of the world whether it's family members at home or neighbors that you've tried to talk to about the Lord Jesus, or the arguments that you've had with friends. Overwhelming.

Somebody on twitter this week put a gif on, it was of a guy who's trying to get his barbecue going and he has a plastic kind of jug full of gasoline and he's throwing it onto the barbecue and as he's throwing it on, the fire leaps up, sets fire to the jug, he throws the jug away and the whole of his garden is caught up in a conflagration, and there were various lines, "This is what happens when you disagree with your wife. This is what happens when you bring up politics at Thanksgiving lunch." And you can apply it to all

kinds of things that happen in church life as well. Triggers, and they can become so discouraging, the dysfunction in our churches and so forth, and maybe you're here and you feel this weariness creeping up, it can lead to people defecting from the Gospel altogether and making shipwreck of their faith.

Something to avoid, weariness, spiritual weariness. Something to watch. How do we get to that point? Well, this is what's taught in the second word of the text. It's translated in the extremely sound version that we use, the ESV, it's translated by the word "faintheartedness" but it actually refers to that which pertains to the psyche or the spirit or more importantly, to the mind. In fact, the older translations translated it like this, faint in your mind so that you grow not weary nor faint in your mind. It has to do with the way we think because most of our Christian life, the way we think affects the way we feel, the way we act, the way we behave, the way we endure, or otherwise. Our thinking is vital and this thinking is vital because the Christian life is a struggle, it is a severe struggle, which is why the Apostle Paul when he's writing to the Ephesians tells them, "Take on yourself the whole armor of God that you may be able to resist and to stand in the evil day." Or when he writes to the Corinthians, "Be watchful. Stand firm in the faith. Act like mature people and be strong." He tells them that they have to be intentional, they have to be vigorous intellectually, acting in faith, choosing to act in faith, trusting.

You see, if you think about it for one minute, most of the people in the world do not believe in Jesus Christ and they don't find it hard not to believe. That means that believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is not a natural thing, it is not something we are built with and it lies latent there until we activate it within ourselves and we put our trust in Christ. Faith in Christ is the gift of God, it is the work of God. It is something that is placed within us by direct action by God and that faith that we have needs to be stirred up from time to time. That's why Paul writing to the Ephesians prays that they might be strengthened with might in the inner being. Our faith needs to be stirred up to action whether it's by the word of God being preached to you, or by a friend coming alongside and slapping you in the face or on the back and encouraging you to get back on track spiritually.

Once our mind is overloaded with negative thoughts, once our mind is caught up in the things of the world or at least the worries of the world, once we find the struggle against false teaching too annoying to continue with, or thinking about how people who are believers can behave so badly, or trying to get your head around church discipline, or those tense conversations we have with one another, or the imperfections we see in those who are our fellow brothers and sisters and even leaders within our church, when our mind is preoccupied with those things, then we are ready to start sliding into spiritual weariness. Proverbs 18 says, "A man's spirit will endure trial, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" Well, that may be where you are this morning, you're maybe not there in the weariness but yet but your mind is all over the place, your mind is not stable or happy, it's preoccupied by other things and these things are wearing you down. They're wearing you down. Maybe they're things we've talked about in the last four weeks are wearing you down. Maybe things further back in your life are wearing you down. Things from your

own past experience in a church or in a community of believers or in your small group are wearing you down.

Something to avoid, something to watch, and then something to consider. Consider him. This word "consider" is a weighty word. It's more than just look, it means pause, think, reflect, meditate, take time for a moment to stop and think. This goes against the grain of evangelical churches, doesn't it, because we're activists. One of the features of evangelicalism in the last 200 years, one of the marks of evangelicalism is activism, so when we come to church as I once was told when I was given the job description of what somebody wanted me to do when I went to preach at a conference, they said, "Liam, what we want you to do is to explain the text and then give us three or four take-aways to go and do during the week." Is that what you want? Is that what people want? Is that what preaching is about, just telling you to go away and during this week, this is what I want you to do, A, B, C, D? Because if that's what you want, I'll tell you what you can go and do: love God, love your neighbor, love your brother, and love your enemy. Four things. From now on at the end of every sermon I'll just say, "Ditto," and you've gone away with the four things that you have to do this week.

But this text is saying there are times we need to stop in our Christian life. I used to have an elder who would come into my study to see me, he was older, I was younger, I was in my mid 20s. He was really old, he was probably in his mid 40s or something, and maybe, you know, even that, and he would come and he would say, "You know," to me as a young pastor, he would say, "You need to stop and smell the roses." I used to think it was really annoying. I mean, I was kind of an activist as a young man and I wasn't all old and sedate as I am now.

But you know, Christianity is not all duty and here we're told to consider, consider who he is. This book has been considering who Jesus is, God of God, the express image of his person; light of light, the radiance of his glory; true God of true God, the only begotten Son of the Father. He's anointed, anointed Christ, in both natures divine and human, and there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. That's who he is in himself but here the focus isn't what he endured, he endured from sinners such hostility against himself. What did Jesus experience? Opposition. Opposition both in word and action and it was personal. It was against him. It was against his person, about who he was, why he'd come into the world, what he was doing. Everything. It was open season on Jesus during his earthly life.

Earlier on in the first paragraph of this chapter, we have a reference to pain and shame and death on the cross was cruel and lingering and shameful, but that wasn't it all and here this bit is applied to us. There was the reproach. What do people think about you? Why is it that when I'm sitting beside someone on the plane and we're talking together and they ask me what I do, why do I hesitate? Why do I hesitate to say I'm a minister? Because that's the end of the conversation usually. Why do we hesitate at work to tell people on a Monday morning where we were the day before? Because of the reproach of Christ. The taunts, the mockery, the contempt that are heaped upon Christ in the public square all the time, they're always there. They ridiculed him. He saved others, himself he

cannot save. He endured the hostility of his contemporaries. They called him low-born, low-bred, a glutton, a winebibber, a friend of the despised Roman collaborators, a friend of the prostitutes, an impostor, a blasphemer, a seditious person, a child of Satan. They tried to catch him in some sin, regularly set him up to try and catch him in sin. They persuaded one of his own followers to betray him. Then they unleashed once they got him their barbaric frenzied fury upon him.

What did Jesus do? He endured it. He persevered. This text has spoken to you and me: persevere, consider him and remember what he did, he persevered. Asking us to look at his human nature, as a human being in his human nature, he persevered. He endured. When they mocked his background, he quoted the Bible, an old proverb, "The prophet is not without honor except in his own country." When they questioned the people he mixed with, he said, "I came to call sinners to repentance." When they hurled their reproaches on him, what did he do? He prayed for them, "Father, forgive them."

Beloved, you and I are to consider Christ in his endurance. We're to consider that he had opposition directed against himself. They told him to his face what they thought of him and he refused to become weary and faint in his mind. He determined to finish the work the Father had given him to do. We're to consider him. Why? Because this, brothers and sisters, is the way in which we glorify God. That's why we're to pray that we would have the same frame of mind as the Lord Jesus had in his human nature submitted to the will of God, in his human nature zealous for the glory of God, in his human nature compassionate towards those who bore the image of God, his fellow human beings. And who in his human nature has been exalted to the right hand of God. We're following him on this course and we will follow him by the grace of God all the way to glory itself.

But there's more. If he suffered and endured, why should it be any different for you and me? If you and I are being called to suffer and we've been frustrated or we've found resistance, or we've been shamed, or we've had false friends, or we've faced oppressive institutions, or ferocious opponents, if we're following Jesus why would we opt out rather than not just follow him to the end? Consider him. That means think, reason, conclude, dwell on it. Chew on it like the cows when they're eating the grass, they eat it, they chew on it, they put some aside, they retrieve it and then they chew on it again, then they put it aside, then they retrieve it and they chew on it again until they have extracted all the nutrition from what they've eaten.

That's the way we're to come to the word of God. My first congregation were perfect at doing this very thing. They would hear me preach to them and they would chew on the word of God. As I was speaking, they would reserve it somewhere and then they'd retrieve it and they'd chew on it again. They would put it away and then they would chew on it again. The most responsive congregation I've ever had. They were all cows, of course, and I was only 12 or 13 but my sermons, they came to hear them and that's what they did. They modeled what you should be doing, only some of you are chewing chewing gum, I know, but I want you to think of using your mind, okay?

You're taking it in, reserving it, bringing it back out again during the week, thinking about it again. Consider him. Make it part and parcel in all of your life. Why? Because ultimately if you look at verse 4, what are we really talking about here? We're talking about our struggle against sin. Our struggle against sin. Whether it's remaining sin in me or the sins of our society or the sins that others are committing against other people that we don't know around the world, it's a struggle against sin. This life is personally and corporately a struggle against sin and we're locked into that conflict and the author says to us, "Are you discouraged? Do you feel weariness setting in? You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." Remember what you signed up for when you came to follow Jesus. Remember what he said to you? "Take up your cross and follow me." You signed up to die. You signed up to die to the world. To die to sin. To die to yourself and to follow him all the way to everlasting life, joy and pleasure forevermore. That's what you signed up for and if in following Jesus you've lost your job, or lost your liberty, or lost your goods, or lost your home, or lost your family, or lost your academic honors, or lost your health, or lost your friends, or lost your popularity, remember all across the world there are believers who are losing their lives for following Jesus.

The Apostle Paul writing to the Philippians says, "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake." In other words, to use John Owens' language, God has designed in his infinite wisdom that for his own glory, the glory of Christ and of the Gospel and of the church itself, that this is the way it has to be. So if we've escaped with a broken heart, or hurt feelings, or false friends, or troubled relationships, or public mockery, or a thousand lesser inconveniences or burdens that we've had to bear in our life, remember you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

I say to us this is the most noble war of all. This is a war that is a struggle against sin. This is a war in which we take on the whole armor of God. This is a war that is fought by believing prayer and the word of God and the fellowship and companionship of the saints. This is a war that has been fought before, a marathon that has been run before by a whole cloud of witnesses, the saints of God who have gotten home to glory already before us are waiting for us at the end of the track. The Lord Jesus himself who has run the race of faith, has been exalted in glory, he is waiting for us at the end of the track. And ours is to follow Jesus all the way until we wake up in glory. "And should they take our life," Luther wrote, "goods, honor, children, wife, yet is their profit small. These things shall vanish all. The city of God remaineth."

Let's pray.

*Father, we pray that by your grace you would enable us not to become weary in well-doing by having our minds fainting with all of the stimuli that would discourage and deflect and rob us of peace, but rather that our eyes might be upon Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. To his praise and glory we pray. Amen.*