

Run Your Race Hebrews 12:1-3, 8/11/19 Steve Harden

“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, 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. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” Hebrews 12:1-3.

This is the word of God. Well, the Bible uses many images to describe what it means to live as followers of Jesus. We find that the Scriptures compare the Christian life to warfare, to doing battle, in 2 Timothy 2:3 it says: “Suffer hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” So, it shows us that Jesus doesn’t promise us an easy life, He doesn’t promise us a life full of comfort. Things don’t always go better with Jesus. Sometimes we have to give up our comforts to be in the race. In Ephesians 6 we read that we are to put on the full armor of God, as we sung and as we prayed a little bit ago, we are at war and we are at war with a powerful enemy. Satan and his demons will lie to you and hurt you and cause great fear in you, so you must fight him. Given the tools that God has given to us.

We read in 1 Corinthians 9 that the Christian life is like a boxing match, Paul says: “I box in such a way so as not beating the air.” You know, he’s not shadow boxing, he’s in the ring; he’s working at it. He’s purposeful in the decisions that he makes. In Romans 6 we read that Paul compares our life before Christ and as a Christian to being a slave. He says we were once slaves to sin and slaves to sinful behavior, and yet now we are freed and emancipated, set free from the

slavery to sin, yet now we are slaves to righteousness, and slaves to God, to do what He has called us to do. These are powerful analogies that help us experience divine reality.

Today, we're finishing up our summer series on faith by looking at what Sarah read on Hebrews 12. In the text this morning, we see that the writer speaks of following Jesus and compares that to running a race. You see, he knows the struggles of the Jewish Christians in Rome, that things are looking really, really bleak for them. Persecution is coming. I mean like dying persecution, confiscation of all your possessions, persecution. Tough times are headed their way, and some of them say, "Phooey on this, I'm out of here. I'm ready to quit. I'm just going to go back to Judaism where I was safe, and nobody bothered me." Having started the race, they were ready to drop out.

But here in chapter 12, the writer culminates his argument from all the way back in Hebrews 11; he culminates his argument by saying, look, the heroes of Judaism that I just listed here in Hebrews 11, all these heroes of the faith, they were looking forward to the promises of God. The ones you're looking back to, to say, I want to go back there, they were all looking forward to your day. These that had such a great Jewish heritage were looking forward to the day when the Messiah would come. When you look at their lives, these guys faced extreme difficulty, extreme danger, but then they responded to it by clinging ever more closely to the promises of God. Don't bow out of the race, now! If you want to follow their example, you stand firm. You endure. You run your race to the end.

I think this is a particularly relevant message and passage to all of us today. As individuals, several of us are going through some difficult times, difficult providences. Whether it's financial difficulty, health issues, relationship struggles, sometimes things are pretty hard. As

a group corporately, it's been hard! But uncertainty about the future is hard. Some of our friends are worshipping elsewhere, that's hard! But I think Jesus would encourage you today, to run your race well. We are followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. We seek to further His reputation, so my friends, run hard! Run strong. Persevere! Trust Him. Don't give up now. There is purpose and meaning in your struggles. They're not for naught. Trust Him. He is growing us up. He is maturing us; He is teaching us. He is training us to become mature followers of Himself. That's what He's doing. Don't give up now! Run hard. Run strong. He would have us, this morning, take heart. Be strong and courageous, looking forward with eager anticipation for what He has in store for us. That's what He wants. This morning I want to explore this image of running the race and show how it brings clarity for us in how to follow Jesus in difficult days. I'm going to suggest four headings that we'll structure our thoughts around: run to win, run with freedom, run with hope, and run looking to Jesus. Four headings.

Let's start. Run to win! The last part of verse 1 here says: "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." I think there are three truths that stand out here. First of all, run your race. Run *your* race. We are on this planet but for a short time. Even if we live to be 100, in light of eternity, that's pretty short. So, the Bible compares our life to a vapor, and the best example of a vapor that I can think of is you know, it's hard to imagine here in August, but when it's really cold outside and you go outside and you breathe and you see your breath? How long does that last? It's not very long, is it? The Bible says your life is but a vapor. The breath out of your mouth on a cold morning. It's short, in light of eternity.

My friends, I can't think of a worse thought than when it comes to the end of my life, when I look back over what I have done, to see that I've just wasted it. That I've piddled it away;

that I never really got into the race, to think that I flittered away my life without purpose and direction, that I just simply existed and coasted through life fills me with just utter, no! I don't want that. I don't want to waste my life. The whole point of this text is one great command to run! To run your race. I don't know what your race will look like. I don't know what my race will look like. I would never have anticipated my race looking the way it has so far. But what I do know is your race will look different than mine. Run *your* race. All our races look different, and it's of little value for me to be running and looking over at your lane and your race and saying: "Man I wish I was over there. Things look so easy for them. They don't seem to struggle like I do." And it's true, some people seem to have a level, flat, asphalt running surface, and some of us climb hills and go into deep valleys and run in the middle of the desert. It's true. Run *your* race. Follow Christ and whatever God puts in your life, know that you're following the way of Jesus. So, run your race.

Secondly, run hard. Following Jesus is a race, it's not an evening stroll. Nor is it running just for your health! It's not what it's about; it's purposeful. Run hard. Following Jesus is like a marathon, or maybe an iron man competition. It's long, endure! In the original language here, this word for 'race,' is the word *agon*, and it's the word we get our word 'agony,' from. And I can associate with that, because whenever I run, it's agony. It's hard. I don't like it very well sometimes, if it's more than three steps, but lo I digress! I bet you didn't think that we'd be saying that following Jesus is agony this morning, huh? But it is sometimes; endure.

Following Jesus takes self-discipline and determination and perseverance. We're not called to a bed of ease. We're not called to seek our comfort at all costs. Think a marathon versus a spa treatment. We're not called to go to the spa! We're called to enter the race, a marathon, to

exert great effort because it is a race we're called to run to win, to run for the prize. Don't just participate. Run to win. You know, when I was coaching my son and my daughters on the basketball floor, I always just said: "Leave it all on the court. Leave it all out there. If you're not tired after playing a game, or after running a race, you probably didn't run hard enough." I love what my hero, Charles Spurgeon, said: "I'd rather burn out, than rust out." Is that your thought about running the Christian life? Running your race? Would you rather burn out than rust out? Is it a marathon or a spa treatment? You see, guys, I know you know this, but let me remind you that we're talking about heaven and hell. We're talking about eternal destinies, both ours, the ones we love, the people in our city, we're talking about eternal things, heaven and hell, forever. We cannot afford to be nonchalant. We cannot afford to follow Jesus whenever it's convenient, or when it's easy, or when I'm not tired.

If your wife or your sister or your brother, your son, someone that you love, you know they have cancer. And you go into the doctor's appointment with them, and your doctor comes in with a big red nose and starts juggling bowling pins, how are you going to feel about that relationship? Wait doc, you don't understand, this is the one that I love. Now's not the time to be flippant. Now's not the time to tell jokes. Now's the time to tell us what we need to do to get better. And yet, can I not say that following Jesus is so much greater, so much more important? The stakes are higher even than the ones who have health issues. It's eternal destinies. So, we're to run seriously; we're to run hard.

Thirdly, we're to run with endurance. Run the whole race, don't quit! Endurance to the end is the message of Hebrews 11. Don't be surprised when you're tempted to run away, or to quit your race. And I think this is really important, not only if you're young and at the beginning

of your race, but also for those of us who have a little grey, or instead of turning grey it turned loose for some of us, right? For some of us who are a little bit older, guys, run hard all the way through. There's no such thing as retiring from following Jesus. We are to run hard until they put us in the ground. Run with endurance.

There's a hymn writer that some day I'll tell his story, I love it, we probably sing the songs that we sing because Isaac Watts lived in the 18th century. It's his story, and I'll tell the story to you sometime, not today, come back. When he was writing a sermon on 1 Corinthians 16:13, he also wrote a hymn that goes along with it. And it's one of my favorite hymns. 1 Corinthians 16:13 says: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." And I don't know, there's something in that verse just, yeah. Act like a man, men. Be strong. This is what Isaac Watts wrote. The name is "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" He says: "Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause, or blush to speak His name? In the name, the precious name, of Him who died for me, through grace I'll win the promised crown, whatever my cross shall be." Now here is where I want you to pay special attention. "Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease? While others fought to win the prize, and sailed through bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face, must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend of grace, to help me on to God? Since I must fight if I would reign, increase my courage, Lord. I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy word." Must I be carried to heaven on beds of ease while others sailed the bloody seas? Run to win.

Alright, secondly, run with freedom. The middle part of verse 1, again, it says: "Let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely." If we're going to run this race, if we're really going to follow Jesus with all that we have, all the way to the end, then we need to free

ourselves from anything that keeps us from running well, from following Him with our whole heart. I hope you paid attention a little bit with the kids, right? We need to lay those things aside. The word translated 'lay aside' here, literally means 'to take your clothes off.' That's the word. Take your clothes off. We know that in athletics, clothing is a hindrance. Warm-up clothes are great for a warm-up, but they don't work as well in the middle of a race. They inhibit your movement. You don't find a marathoner wearing sweats and a down jacket, because he's just not going to win that way. That's not how it works. So here, the writer says that there are two things we are told to lay aside.

The first one, 'lay aside every weight.' The word is 'ankas' here, it's a bulk or a mass of something, like a big thermos or a snack bag. You can't win the race when you're carrying a bowling ball. Now this weight is not necessarily sinful, it's not necessarily bad in and of itself, often it's quite innocent. Yet, it's something that doesn't help you win the race. Again, no one tries to win a race carrying a bowling ball. If something is superfluous to your race, you lay it down, you put it aside. If it weighs you down, if it diverts your attention, if it saps your energy, if it quenches your enthusiasm for the things of God, you need to lay it down, lay it aside. You don't need it in your race. This is a race, and you just don't have time for that, so lay aside every weight: good, bad, or indifferent, it could be totally innocent, but if it hinders you in running your race, lay it down.

The other thing it says is "lay aside every sin," the sin which clings so closely. The picture here is of a person running with a long coat or a skirt that wraps tightly around your legs. Girls, you know more than about this than I do, I promise. But how hard is it to run in a tight skirt? I watched my daughters try, and they didn't do so well. They kind of run from the knees

down. The sin that so easily entangles you, sin clings to your legs so you can't follow Jesus very well. The indication in our text here is the writer is thinking about a specific sin, the sin that so easily entangles you. What in past days preachers would call a "besetting sin." Is that a new term for you? But it's besetting sin, that sin that is kind of yours, that you struggle with, that sin that specifically haunts you, that you tend to struggle with, that sin more than other sins, and it could be all kinds of things. It could be sexual sin, it could be drunkenness, it could be a bitterness in spirit, it could be anger, I don't know, unforgiveness, maybe gossip. It's just so easy, that's the one that I fall into, or maybe it's worry or dishonesty or laziness. It could be any of these. That one that just tends to trip me up, that I wrestle with more often than the others. Whatever it is that tends to sabotage your soul, lay it down.

How do you lay it down? Well you confess your sin, and you seek to turn from it. It's really simple, not easy. But it's simple. Confess to your Father and seek to turn from it. This is not new stuff, this is not new doctrine at all. Jesus says deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me. Galatians 5 talks about the desires of the flesh and how they war against the desires of the Spirit. Those who belong to Jesus have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires, and we seek to live by His Spirit. Again, we're not talking here about justification, we're not talking about our sins keeping us from coming to Jesus, but we're talking about after you know Jesus, then He wants you to live by the Spirit. To be blessed in following Jesus is to seek to keep His covenant.

I think we all need to honestly assess our lives and say, does this help me follow Jesus? Does this help me run my race? Or does this encumber me, with a weight. Is it a bowling ball or is it a tight skirt? And just honestly assess. I think sometimes we ask ourselves the wrong

question. I think sometimes we ask ourselves, is this a sin? I wonder if this is a sin. I really think that that's probably not the right question. I think maybe a better question is, does this hinder me in my efforts to follow Jesus? That's a better question, whether it's a sin or not.

Run to win, run with freedom, but run with hope as well. The very first part of verse one says: "Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we can run with hope because others have run the race before us." I love that little word at the very beginning when it says, 'therefore,' because I know something really good is going to come after 'therefore.' Because, what the writer is doing here is he's summing up all that he's said before, and for us it's here in chapter 11, summing up everything that he was trying to say before, he's drawing it all together, tying it with a bow for us, because he knew that we need it, right? In Hebrews 11 he tells the story of these heroes that lived by faith. They believed the promise for a Messiah to come, and that one day they would be free from their sins, one day they would live together in a resurrected body in heaven. They knew that and they believed the promises, and they lived in light of that. They believed what God had said.

The term here, "so great a cloud of witnesses," implied in the New Testament day that there was a big crowd that gathered for a particular purpose, and so all these witnesses are gathered together to show us something. These witnesses had finished their race, they had endured to the end, and now they're passing that baton on to us. And they call to us to run; run to win, run with freedom, run with hope. When we see that they have run, and it's possible to run, that it's been done before us, we can be encouraged that there's hope. They had faith in the promises of God, and faith led them to do extraordinary things.

Now, sometimes when we think about this, we are here surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we think that okay, so they're our spectators and we're down on the field and they're up in the stands and rooting us on. Well that may be true, but that's probably not what the writer is saying for us here. What he's saying for us here is more like witnesses in a court room. The idea here is not that they're rooting us on to victory, but they're bearing witness and their testimony in the court of faith is that it's possible to live by the promises of God, and to act accordingly. They're bearing witness by their lives and their words that you can live by faith, that you can trust the promises of God, and that it's important and you can run your race well. They're bearing witness in the courtroom of faith. Through their stories they say, "I finished the race. Run."

I'll admit to you that sometimes I get discouraged: so do you. Sometimes I get really discouraged. Any number of things can set off discouragement for me. Sometimes criticism, sometimes self-doubt, sometimes facing situations that I don't have control over, or things I can't fix, and I get discouraged. But one of the most helpful things that I do that helps me in those times of discouragement is to read biographies of those saints who have gone on before. We've got several shelves in our home of biographies of Christian saints. You know, sometimes I read about, I talked about Spurgeon, I talk about him all the time I know, but you know, I read about how he was voted out of Baptist fellowship back in England during that day in the 1850s. Spurgeon? What? I read about Jonathan Edwards who was fired from his church. Jonathan Edwards was probably the greatest American theologian who ever lived. I read about Simeon who was a pastor for 55 years at a church in Cambridge, who for many years preached to an empty church every week, yet he was faithful.

And so, I look back at those who have gone before and I take heart that whatever it is that I'm facing now is not anything new. But there have been those who have gone before who have been faithful, who stood strong, who did what was right, and now I get to read their stories, maybe somebody someday will get to read my story, if I run well and endure. So, look back, take fresh courage. Somehow it helps that someone has gone before you and endured difficult days and come out the other side.

So run to win, run with freedom, run with hope, but finally, run looking to Jesus. Look at verse 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." The lives of saints who are listed here in the Scriptures, those lives of great men and women of the faith that we read about in church history, are all powerful examples of what it means to trust in the promises of God, but none of them hold a candle to the example of Jesus. The writer refers to how in the ancient games in Greece at the end of the race there was this wreath that would be hung on the pedestal at the finish line. And so, all the runners, when they got to that point in the race, were exhausted; they'd given everything that they had, there was no strength left in their legs. But then they could look up and see the finish line, and see the wreath, the award, the reward for finishing that race and it would motivate them to finish, to endure the pain, and to win. You see, we gain encouragement in our race, yes looking back to those who have run before, but our real motivation is to see Jesus. We're looking forward and seeing the One who truly won the race. You see, there's two things here.

First of all, looking to Jesus means turning your eyes off of anything else, so that you can focus on Jesus. You see, you can't focus on Jesus and focus on the guy running next to you. And

you can't focus on Jesus if you're looking out over here and thinking, "Boy, I'm so full of self-pity and all these things, I don't know what I'm going to do." No, if you're going to focus on Jesus, you have to focus there and nowhere else. Focus on Jesus. Hold all your affection for Him and look at Him.

Notice, the author uses "Look to Jesus," and not "Look to Christ." And I think this is very purposeful when he writes this. He says, don't just look at the exalted Christ who is now seated at the Father's right hand, look to the human Jesus and how He ran His race and the example He left for us. He is our perfect example. He is the founder of our faith, and the chief or preeminent example. That's what the text says. His entire earthly life was the embodiment of trusting God, trusting His father, trusting the promises that what is written is true. He lived in perfect dependence on and obedience to His Father. He ran His race perfectly so we can look to Him to run our race.

But secondly, I really want you to see what motivated Jesus, what motivated Jesus to run His race well. Our text says, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame." What is it that motivated Jesus? It wasn't duty. It wasn't just gutting it out and doing the right thing. No! It was joy. His desire for that joy was so strong that He was willing to endure the greatest pain and the greatest suffering that had ever occurred or will ever occur to a human being and He did it because of joy. He was so motivated by joy that He willingly endured the cross and just despised the shame, despised the shame. He counted the shame as nothing in comparison with the joy. Do you see?

It was this pursuit of joy that made all the difference. It was the joy of being reunited with His Father. It was the joy of His father's smile when He knew He would please His Father when

He came home again. The joy of bringing many, many people, you and me, with Him, of accomplishing His purpose. The joy of running His race well; the joy of being exalted at the right hand of His Father, forevermore. That joy of experience and fellowship is what drove Him. It was the promise of glory, the reward of heaven.

My friends, if you and I are going to look at Jesus as our supreme example of what it looks like to run our race well, then joy has to be the motivation. It's not gutting it out. It's enduring in light of the joy of being with Jesus in that day. Now it's really easy to focus on the right here, right now, what's happening. But my friends, we've got to lift up our eyes and look at the end of the race and say, "I'm going to be with Jesus." That is the only thing, that joy is the only that's going to help us endure this race to the end, because cruddy things are going to happen to you, and sometimes cruddy things are going to happen to you because you're a follower of Jesus and it will be okay, if you can keep your eye on the prize. Raise your eyes a little. It was joy that motivated our Savior, and the reward? We'll be able to look at Jesus face to face, and how I long to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Don't you? Isn't there something within you that just responds to that? Yes! Thank you! I want that. I want that, don't you want that? Well done, Steve! Well done

Let's run our race well! Laying aside all the junk, the encumbrances, whether it's sin or not, let's go! Let's run together. Let me close with the last recorded words of the apostle Paul. It's written in 2 Timothy 4 at the end of his days, he knew he was about to die, and he was writing to his son in the faith, Timothy. Listen to what he says: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth," to come, right? "There is laid up for me the

crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.” Do you see yourself in that verse? Are you one of those who have loved His appearing? If so, then there is a crown of righteousness that is waiting for you. But endure and run your race well. Paul finished well. These saints of Hebrews 11 finished well. May our names be listed among those who finish well. Let’s pray.

Father we come to you in the name of Jesus, and we ask for several things, but right now I pray that you would motivate us to finish well with the joy that is ours in coming. The joy of that day, when we’ll see you face to face. How we long to finish our race well. But Father, if that’s going to happen, it’s going to be because you gave us grace and mercy, you’ve given us a heart to look to Jesus, you’ve given us the desire and the strength, the willingness to lay aside all the encumbrances, the bowling balls and the tight skirts, will you do that for us today? Help us to see what those encumbrances are, help us to have the strength and the desire to lay them down. We need You. And Father, there may well be somebody here who has not ever entered the rest, who is not a follower of Jesus, who all of this sounds so strange and weird to. But would you send your Holy Spirit even now to make blind eyes see, and to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh so that they might understand and yearn and desire to know Jesus? And we know when that happens that You’ve been here, and You’ve been working in us. I pray this in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Well now’s the time when we celebrate the Lord’s Table together, the Lord’s Supper, sometimes we call it Communion. But in thinking about celebrating the Lord’s Table today, I had to go a little farther into Hebrews 12. We didn’t have time to look at it today during the sermon time but I have two more minutes. So, verses 3-4 of chapter 12 says: “Consider Him who

endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” So, what is he saying? When we come to the Table, we consider Him who endured that hostility from sinners, we consider Him who in His struggle against sin shed His own blood. He did shed blood in His struggle against sin. His blood purchased our ransom. His blood gave us grace and mercy. His blood gave us the right to become children of God. And that’s what we celebrate with the Lord’s Table.

Looking to Him, looking at His death and resurrection, that’s how we keep from growing weary and faint hearted. He keeps us in the race and the reason why we celebrate the Table every week is we need to be reminded every week that we win. It’s over. We win. Now let’s finish strong.

It is said that the Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed, He took the bread and after He blessed it He broke it and He said: “This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way He also took the cup after supper and He said: “This cup is the new covenant of my blood, do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.” We celebrate the Table to remember that the victory is won, that we can have victory in our race because of what Jesus has done, because He won His race. When we celebrate the Lord’s Table together, we invite all those who are followers of Jesus Christ to celebrate with us, whether you belong to this local congregation or not. If you are a follower of Jesus, welcome to the Table. And if you’re here this morning and you’re not yet a follower of Jesus, I would encourage you to take this time to think over some of the things you’ve heard today. We long for you to join with

us at the Table, but more importantly, we long for you to join with us in being followers of Jesus,
so if you will stand together with me.