

We are going to talk about running this morning. In the Bible the Christian life is pictured as a fight, as a marriage, as a branch abiding in the vine. It is compared to boxing, farming, being a good soldier. But many times it is described as being in a race.

All of us who belong to Jesus are in a race! It is a long race. It is a hard race. And we need all the help we can get to run that race, and to finish that race. This passage tells us how to run! How to run with endurance, how to finish strong. Let's read Hebrews 12:1,2

“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.”

Our life of faith is like a long-distance race. It will not end till we see Jesus face to face. The goal of this passage is for us to KEEP ON running! -to keep on running with the utmost amount of faith and confidence in God, clear to the end!

A big part of the motivation for this kind of life is that we are surrounded by others who lived THEIR lives with great faith in God! Therefore, SINCE a “cloud of witnesses” surrounds us, “Let US run with endurance the race that is set before us!!!” Cloud is a metaphor for crowd. So when you hear cloud of witnesses, think “crowd of witness”. You are not the only person to ever run this race! You are not the only one who has ever walked with God, through hard things. Your life is not the only life that has required extraordinary faith, effort and endurance.

In fact there are thousands upon thousands of faithful people, who have already ran the race, that you are running now. Many of their lives were unthinkably hard! Some were tortured, some were mocked and flogged, some were in chains and in prison; some were destitute, afflicted, mistreated! But they pressed on with great faith and endurance. They could have quit, but they DIDN'T! They held fast their hope in God. They were not perfect men and women but they lived for God, and for the things God had promised them!

THESE are the kind of people we are to consider, as we run our race! Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith!"

The question is: Who do you imitate? Who do you keep in mind as your pattern for living? Is it faithful saints who loved and served God through incredible adversity? Or is it the people next door who don't seem to care that much about God....and are basically living for themselves?

If your eyes are on people whose goal is an easy, peaceful, pleasure filled life, then you will probably struggle with keeping yourself in the race God has set out for you!

We are to be conscious of GOD'S people, who have already ran their race with great faith and endurance. This cloud of witnesses are specifically the saints we just read about in chapter 11: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Moses's parents, the prophets, Jeremiah, Daniel and Isaiah, and so on. They were all people, who overcame great obstacles, and endured great suffering to remain faithful to God.

ESV study bible: “the imagery of being surrounded by these witnesses gives the sense that they are eagerly watching from heaven, and the image of running the race that is set before us might lead one to think of an athletic race in a sports arena, with all these heroes of the faith from ch. 11 watching as present-day believers take their turn in the same race that they once ran”.

Sam Storms “The OT saints are envisioned as spectators in the amphitheater because their lives of faith are viewed as exerting on us, the same kind of influence and motivation, that the shouting crowds, had on the participants in some athletic contest”. I was never much of an athlete, but I can imagine the powerful influence that a crowd of spectators can have on a runner or other athlete.

We are to let these OT saints stir our hearts to run and to run well!  
We are to draw encouragement and motivation from their faith and perseverance!

I believe all of us live life with an imaginary crowd in the stands. We do! We all, consciously, or unconsciously live our life before an audience. The question is.. who is your audience? Who is the “crowd” before whom you live your life? Are you thinking of that cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11 (and others like them?) Or are you living your life with another “crowd” in mind? Who are the people in your life whose opinions matter most to you? Who are the people whom you want to please most? Who are the people you allow to have the most influence and authority in your life? If they are NOT men and women of God, you will not do well in running your race for Jesus.

The world must NOT be the people you live for and run for. John wrote “Little children, you are from God... They are of the world. That is why they speak from the world’s perspective, and the world listens to them. We are from God!”. The people who believed God when it cost them everything, those are your people, your “crowd” before whom you run your race.

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“Let us also lay aside every weight” (hindrance) Note the little word “also”. All of God’s people have had to lay aside weights. And we ALSO must lay aside things that hinder us from running our race for God. Weights are different than sins. They are anything that holds us back from living fully for God. A weight might be a wonderful opportunity you have to do something. It might be a possession that absorbs your time and passions and essentially removes you from the race! There maybe nothing wrong with it, except that it hinders you from living for God, and for his people.

A weight might be something that happened in your past, and that has become your focus, and it hinders you from abandoning yourself to God and what he has called you to. Some are held back by an experience of rejection in their past, or a parent who never gave their approval. These are real, painful things, yet if we focus on them instead of the healing power of God’s love they become weights, that keep us from going on to maturity in Christ.

Here are some of the possible weights of these OT saints.

\*Moses had the weight of not being raised by his own parents. He had the weight of the riches and pleasures of Egypt, which he had to lay aside. Moses also had the baggage of being a terrible speaker. That is the weight that almost kept him out of the race God called him to!

\*Daniel had the weight of being taken from home when he was a teenager and made a captive of Babylon.

\*Rahab had the baggage of her past sin, as a prostitute.

\*Abraham's weight could have been a desire for security and safety. But he laid that aside and went out not knowing where he was going.

\*David had the weight of a son who rebelled against him.

\*Noah and all the prophets had the weight of preaching to people, and getting no response at all.

We all have things that will hinder us from running for God IF we do not put them aside. God's word to us is simply, "Lay aside every weight!" May God graciously expose our weights to us so that we may cast them off and be free to run strong and well for him.

Let us also lay aside "the sin that clings so closely or so easily entangles." All saints have had to deal drastically with their own sins. You are NOT the only one!! Today almost everyone thinks there is some special circumstance that exempts them from laying aside their sin. We tend to excuse our entanglement in sin by saying our situation, our past, our personality, or our inherent make-up as a person makes it impossible for us to lay aside our sin. The devil is a con artist. And he is selling this lie to everyone who will believe it. And when people believe it, they are usually entangled in that sin the rest of their lives. God's word to us simply "lay aside the sin that so easily entangles". (NIV and NASB)

\*"Let us run with perseverance!" Perseverance means continuing on when it would be easier to quit. It is the opposite of surrender, or giving up in the face of obstacles. Your race WILL include weariness and tears and battles! Therefore it WILL require perseverance!

\*Ultimately, we find the strength to run with endurance by looking unto Jesus. “Let us run..looking to Jesus”. This LOOK TO JESUS is what gives us the power to run with endurance. Charles Wesley wrote of the powerful effect upon our hearts that comes from just the name of Jesus. “Jesus the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease, tis music in the sinners’ ear, tis life and health and peace”.

As we lift up our hearts to Jesus, and consider him, and worship him, we are able to run our race! When we are in a health crisis, or a relationship crisis, or are overtaken by fears, or sorrows, it is by looking unto Jesus, that we get back on our feet, and back in the race, and running with endurance! There is deep encouragement and strength in looking to Jesus. There is power to keep running in looking to Jesus. Looking to Jesus renews our energy.

Looking to Jesus is more than recalling to mind facts about him. It is that. But.. It is looking to him as our present LIVING, Savior. He himself said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age”. The gospel gives us direct contact with Christ. “We all with uncovered faces, behold the glory of the Lord”. By faith we can go and look right into his face and behold his glory. By faith we enter right into the heavenly places and look at him seated at the right hand of the Father. Isaac Abrose said, “Looking unto Jesus is that great ordinance appointed by God for our (highest) good”. “The one who deals immediately with Christ will (bring more blessing to his soul) in a day than (any other method will bring) in a year”. David said, “My eyes are ever towards the Lord”. (Psalm 25:15) That is the way we run our race!

This means there are OTHER things we do not look at! We look to Jesus NOT someone or something else! There is a phenomena in riding a motorcycle that is called target fixation. If you fix your eyes on an object you WILL run into that object. If there is a 2 x 4 in the road ahead of you, you look at the clear path around that board, NOT at the board you are trying to avoid. If you stare at the board it will draw you to it, like a powerful magnet. That principle works very much the same in spiritual things. We don't look at what will make us crash. We look to Jesus!

I've noticed when I've been involved in helping someone who had a bad habit they wanted to quit, usually, all they can talk about is that habit, and trying to quit and making promises and resolutions, then failing. But staring at our sin instead of Jesus will not free us from our sins. Jesus is the one who sets the captives free! Jesus is the one who released us from our sins. In looking to him, and loving him, and finding our joy and satisfaction in we are set free from sin.

We run with our eyes fixed on Jesus and NOT on our baggage, not even on our sins, not on our past, not on our failures or successes. ”  
Robert Murray McCheyne said "For every one look at your problems, your weaknesses, your failures -- take ten looks at Jesus."  
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We look to Jesus because he is” the author and finisher of faith”. He has been down here on earth in the fight! He's been tempted, he's been tried. He has been down in the arena! He showed us what faith is, in how he “endured the cross, despising the shame”. Through all the injustice and cruelty he obeyed and trusted his Father. We learn faith by looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of faith.

Looking to Jesus builds in us that quality of faith that keeps us going on, through suffering and even shame! One of the most amazing wartime feats of endurance was the Russian defense of Stalingrad against the Germans in WWII. Hitler invaded Russia in 1941 and was determined to take this city. He threw the might of the German 6<sup>th</sup> army and German Panzer divisions against this one city. But the Russians held out for over 6 months and the German 6<sup>th</sup> army were all killed or taken prisoners of war. One Russian officer gave this reason for their endurance. ‘We Russians were ideologically prepared for the battle of Stalingrad. ‘Above all, we had no illusions about the cost, and(we) were prepared to pay it.’ If you want to know how to win the race you must have no illusions about the cost and be prepared to pay it. We get that hardness and ability to endure by looking to Jesus who endured the cross.

By looking to Jesus we also see the importance of looking to the joy God has in store for us. Jesus endured the cross, “for the joy set before him”. He was looking to the glory and joy that would come AFTER the suffering of the cross. He focused on the joy of saving you and me. He focused his heart on the fullness of joy of being at the Father’s right hand. So he endured the cross by faith looking to the joy ahead of him. The anticipation of future joy in God is the driving power of OUR endurance, too. Jesus described heaven and an invitation to come and share in the JOY of your master. Heaven will be sharing the Father’s joy for all eternity!

The biggest problem for some of us is that we have no real expectancy that joy is ahead of us. We are not looking at the joy set before us. The thing we need to learn most is that joy is found in God and fullness of joy will be ours in his presence forever. And then we go run our race, for the joy that is set before us!

Clearly the most important take away this morning is to...Look to Jesus. He is our living hope. Love Jesus and trust him and look to him! And you will find motivation and strength, to run your race, no matter how long or hard your race is! No matter what you are going through, no matter how painful the answer is to look to Jesus!