

Run the Race (Hebrews 12:1-3)

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Date: 28 June 2026

Preacher: Brett Sanders

[0:00] But while I was gone, you heard two incredible sermons from Hebrews chapter 11. And I'm not going to lie, I was a little jealous when I was leaving. I was like, okay, Jason and Kenneth, they get to preach Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith.

This is, you know, that's kind of one of the ones that everybody looks forward to as you're going through this. But what I do get the opportunity to do is preach one of my favorite passages, if not my favorite passage, in all of the book of Hebrews.

And that's going to be coming from Hebrews chapter 12 and the first three verses here. You see, in chapter 11, the author of Hebrews provided a list of faithful examples of people.

He then uses these examples as a way of urging us to remain faithful. But the point of the passage is not to look at these people as the end, but to look to Jesus, our ultimate source of finding strength for endurance.

Even in the midst of the Hall of Faith, we are called to look to Jesus. And so with this in mind, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles with me to Hebrews chapter 12.

[1:13] And we're going to read the first three verses this morning. This is what the Word of the Lord says. It says this, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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 faint-hearted.

You see, everything in this section centers around the idea of running this spiritual race. This great race is one that takes place in a stadium filled with Old Testament saints.

This is not merely a stadium of spectators who are there just to watch you. It is a stadium of enduring saints who've already finished running, who've already ran this race, faith-filled athletes who have been in our shoes and have faithfully endured.

In addition to this stadium, this picture of this race is taking place, we're told to run. We are told to run. Now, many times throughout Scripture, we're told to run this race.

[2:44] There's a few times where we're called to walk or where it's described as walking.

Sometimes that's in a positive context, sometimes in a negative context. King David in Psalm 23 says, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

And so this walking signifies this calm assurance that we have before God in the midst of one of the most difficult times any of us will face as we think about the impending death.

It gives us this picture of this calm assurance that even in what brings fear to most everyone, we can have assurance knowing that God has made a way for us.

But also kind of in a negative context, we see Paul talking about walking in this life. And he talks about how in Ephesians chapter 2, how we were walking in the ways of this world, how we're just living in this world.

But here we're called to run. And so with this running of this race, it gives us this idea of urgency. It gives us this idea of running and this urgency and purpose that we are called to live.

[3:52] And so from this section, what we're going to see is a few insights into running this race. To begin with, we are told to run with perspective.

We're to run with perspective. I'm convinced that many times as believers, we don't take our faith very seriously as we should because we don't understand how truly important it is.

The author here tells us to pause and consider our surroundings, to look around us. Listen to how he opens. He says, therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

The therefore tells you to look back at what was just being said. And you have this, all of these witnesses, all of these men and women of faith in chapter 11.

He says, therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Chapter 11, the author highlights a few characters from the Old Testament, highlighting the faith that they shared in difficult circumstances.

[4:59] In each and every one of these situations, these men and women had a choice to make. They had decisions to make. Follow God or follow this world. And the right perspective helps us to see that following God is worth it.

In fact, he tells us in Moses, it talks about the example of Moses in verse 26. It says, and he was looking to the reward. He was looking forward. He had the right perspective.

And so here you have a small sampling of Old Testament saints who understood that following God was worth it. Now, the list was not intended to be an all-inclusive list, but a window into many that were faithful.

A picture of those who have gone before us. I want you to listen to how Michael Kruger paints this picture for us. He says, In the crowd sits Noah, who endured much hardship and faithfully built an ark.

Enoch, who loved God intimately and walked with him. Sarah, who trusted God's promise and received power to conceive. In the crowd sits Abraham, Moses, and Rahab, and all the others.

[6:12] But there is something very different about this crowd. They are not there to watch you. They are there to be seen by you as you run.

This encourages us. And you think about what is possible. There will be times when you think you cannot finish, that you cannot push past the pain, but then you realize the stadium that is filled with people who have finished the race.

And you realize that it can be done. You know, in my office, well actually, in the storage room upstairs right now, but hopefully in my office very, very soon, I have all kinds of things that I have collected from different trips.

One of the things that I like to collect from different trips and mission trips are nativity sets. And so I've got nativity sets from all over the world. And what they are there for is to remind me of those trips.

And it's not just to remind me of the trip and the place, but to remind me of the people who are there, of the places that we've gone. In fact, I just got one from Canada. It took me a little while to find one.

[7:20] In fact, I didn't find it until the day before we left. And I thought I was going to have to settle for a bear nativity with all the characters were bears. But thankfully, I found another one. But we have this and they're there to remind me of the places, but more importantly, the people that need to hear the gospel message, but also the faithful saints that are there preaching the word to be reminded to pray for them that are doing this race well.

The author gives us these witnesses not as a means of scaring us, not as a way of saying, well, Abraham's just looking down on you, making sure Noah's up there and Sarah's shaking her finger at you, making sure that you do what you're doing.

No, it's not that. But we're to see them as faithful witnesses that have gone before us that we can take encouragement to run this race well, to understand this race is doable.

It's worth it. They are there to put the right perspective in our lives. The next insight the author gives us in running this spiritual race is that we are to run with purpose and intentionality.

We're to run with purpose and intentionality. One of the things this passage clearly shows us is the importance of running with purpose, meaning not running aimlessly, but running with intentionality.

[8:47] This is something that doesn't just happen. It takes us being purposeful. And I want you to listen to how the author describes this. He says, Let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

And so here the author of Hebrews is giving us another sports as a way of explaining how we should run the race that God has set for us to run.

He makes an interesting imperative here. He tells us to put two things aside. Now, one, it's not hard for us to understand. He tells us to put away sin, that we should be putting that away.

And I think that's something that most of us understand. Most of us, if we believe Jesus, if we claim to be followers of Christ, we're not going to argue with that. We understand that we should be putting away sin.

And we understand that this is something that we should lay aside. Few people will argue with that. But we must be intentional with this. You don't have to work very hard to be entangled by sin.

[9:54] In fact, that's the default in life. If you do nothing to fight sin, sin will cling to you very tightly. So if you are going to run the race, you have to be proactively casting off sin.

But he also tells us something else here. He says, let us lay aside every weight. Every weight that keeps us from running. Remember, the author of Hebrews is writing to a community of Hebrew believers who apparently were struggling with looking back on Judaism instead of looking to what Judaism was pointing them to.

They were looking back on this old life and remembering all of those things instead of looking forward to what it was pointing them to. And it was pointing them to Christ. But what's interesting is that what they were now struggling with at one time was good for them.

At one time, this was what God was calling them to do. What they are struggling with at one time is exactly what God was wanting them to do. You see, they were letting what God called them to do get in the way of what God was calling them to.

They let what God called them to get in the way of what God was calling them to. And I think this is something that we struggle with many times. Sometimes it may be that we feel like at one point in our life, God had called us to something and that we just missed it.

[11:28] We just missed that we didn't do what he called us to do. And now all of a sudden, since we didn't do what he called us to do, then we've just messed up the rest of our lives and we can never get back to doing what God is calling us to do.

And nothing could be further from the truth. If that were true, none of us would be able to fulfill what God is calling us to do because we've all missed it at some points. And so that's not it.

But also, I think sometimes we let what God has called us to get in the way of what he's calling us to do right now in our lives. You see, there's no doubt in my mind that 14 years ago that God called me and our family to this church as a youth pastor.

And it was something that we struggle with. We prayed about it. It wasn't that we didn't want to come back to Toccoa. I wasn't one of those who was like, you know, as soon as I'm graduating, I'm never looking back.

No, we love it. But all of a sudden, this church is asking us to move home. And in my mind, I'm thinking, well, well, God, I want to be open to going wherever you lead us to. Is that really bad?

[12:34] That seems pretty convenient for us. And so we struggled with it. But the search committee that was calling me, they asked, said, pray about it. And they prayed about it. And after both of us genuinely praying about it, we felt like that is exactly what God was calling us to do.

And I felt and I still feel like that the title of youth pastor is one of my favorite titles that I've ever had. It was a time that I enjoyed immensely. And then after that, the Lord called us here as associate pastor of missions and discipleship, a title that I got to enjoy for about a year.

And so we were able to do that. But during that time, it was a time where I got to think about and focus on some aspects of discipleship and missions that would be really difficult to do and devote the time to in the role that I'm currently in.

And then so after a year of that, we began to pray and we began to ask, Lord, Lord, do you want me to step into this role as senior pastor? Do you want me to move into this?

And after praying about it and asking others to pray about it, we feel like that is what the Lord was leading us to do. But you see, if I got so caught up in, well, I know that God called me to be a youth pastor, then those next steps would have never happened.

[13:52] We can't let what God called us to get in the way of what God is calling us to. You see, you may be at a place in your life right now where you did exactly what God called you to do at one point.

You did exactly what you felt like he was leading you to do at one point. Maybe there was a time in your life where you had young kids at home and you felt like the Lord was leading you to take a step back from serving in some different capacities so that you could focus that time and focus that energy on raising your children.

That's a wonderful thing. That's a season that sometimes God calls us to. But maybe now those children are grown up. Maybe now those children are in college and they're in high school. Maybe they're involved in some different aspects of ministry of the church. And now you have to look at what God is calling you to. Some of us may have done an excellent job of listening to God years ago and we're still doing what he called us to do.

But because of a lack of growth, because of a lack of obedience, what he called us to is getting in the way of what he's calling us to right now.

[15 : 03] And so from this we must remember that absolutely we need to ask the question, is what I'm doing a sin? But for the believer, that's about as low of a bar as we could ask.

That's about as low of a thing as we could ask. The better question that we as believers should be asking ourselves is not whether it's a sin or not, but does it help me run?

Is what I'm doing getting in the way of me doing what God has called me to do? No serious runner puts on extra weight before a race. You don't see any Olympian running an event in hiking boots and blue jeans.

It doesn't happen. No, they go out there in shorts that are so short that it would be kind of unacceptable to wear in any other situation other than a race.

And they find as light of shoes as they could possibly find. And they take off as much as they possibly can so that they can run the race better. Let us as believers set aside anything that doesn't help us run.

[16 : 14] And so finally from this passage, we see that as believers, we must run with perseverance and focus. For this final consideration, we are told to run with endurance and focus.

The Christian life is a race and we are to run, but it's not a sprint. We are to run with endurance and keep our focus on Jesus. Listen to these words again.

And let us run with endurance. Here we are to run the race that God has called us to run.

How are we to run it? With endurance. By saying this, the author is very clear that he has in mind a marathon and not a sprint.

What he is calling us to is a long obedience in the same direction. The life of a Jesus follower is a lifetime of faithful endurance. But the author has also tells us how we can do this.

[17 : 39] He says you do this by fixing your eyes on Jesus. One of the things that many track coaches will tell you is that you don't spend time looking behind you.

You don't. If you're running a race and you start looking over your shoulder at everybody who's coming behind you, you are going to get chewed out by the track coach. You're going to get you because they want you to be laser focused on that finish line.

Of finishing this race well. Looking forward to that finish line. We run. As we run, we should be looking to Jesus. And as we look at all the ways in which we run, we recognize that we have a perfect example in Scripture to follow.

And the example is Jesus himself. I want you to listen to something in verse 2 again. It says this, Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. It wasn't until a few years ago that the weight of this verse really began to sink in for me.

[18 : 49] I began to think about this verse and it really began to sink in. And reading others, You see, there's much joy in fulfilling what God had called Jesus to do.

And being obedient to his Father. But I think that this verse is implying us to go a little bit further. To go further with this, Charles Spurgeon notes. He says, The joy that was set before Jesus was principally the joy of saving you and me.

I know it was the joy of fulfilling the Father's will. Of sitting down at the Father's throne. Of being made perfect through suffering. But still I know that it was the grand motive of the Savior's suffering. The joy of saving us. You see, in John chapter 3, John says that God sent Jesus into the world to save us. And so what is the one thing that Jesus has on this side of the cross that he didn't have on that side of the cross?

Is it a perfect relationship with the Father? No, he's had that forever. What's the one thing that he has on this side of the cross that he didn't have on that side of the cross? And it's a relationship with you and me.

[19 : 59] A way for us to come to him in faith and be saved and enter into that relationship. We are the reason he endured the cross. May we live with this perspective as we run the race that God has

called us to run.

But you see, the prize that Christians are focusing their lives on is not ultimately heaven. It's not heaven. If we are truly Christians, if we belong to God by faith in Jesus, heaven is already ours. That's not something we're working to obtain. If we are true believers, if we understand the gospel and someone asks you, are you going to heaven? We don't say, I hope so.

Or we'll see one day. Or I'm doing my best to get there. No. We understand that heaven is ours because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

Not anything that we are doing on our own. But making sure that what we're to focus on, the prize that we're looking forward to, is the same prize that Jesus ran for.

[21:09] We keep our focus on what Jesus was focused on. Making sure that our priority is telling a lost and dying world there is hope and that it is found in Jesus. Our focus must be fixed on Jesus and telling a lost and dying world about him.

If we let that be our focus, then all of a sudden our lives began to be streamlined. All of a sudden we began to run this race well. How many of you in here can remember when you first learned to drive a car?

Anybody in here? For some of us it wasn't too long ago. For others it may have been a long time ago. But I can remember, I can distinctly remember learning to drive.

Now I may not be able to remember all the details as well as my parents. They probably remember the traumatic side of it a little bit and all those details a little bit more. But I can remember learning to drive a car.

And one of the things that I struggled with just for a little bit at the very beginning was being a little bit jerky with a car. With being a little bit jerky with it, I was trying to, you know, to make sure it stayed in the lines.

[22:11] And if you got motion sick, it probably wasn't a great thing to do to ride with me at the beginning. But I can remember just trying to keep it in the lines and it just kind of felt like it was doing this.

And I can remember my dad asking me a question. He says, what are you looking at? And being probably a smart-aleck teenager, Catherine says, I probably still have a smart mouth.

But I have a little bit more of a filter now. I said something along the lines. I'm looking at the road. What do you think I'm looking at? I'm looking at the road. I'm trying to keep it in the... He says, but where are you looking in the road?

I said, I'm looking right here in front of me. I'm looking at the road right in front of me trying to keep it. And he says, stop looking at where you are and look at where you're going. And then all of a sudden, the jerkiness stopped.

All of a sudden, it wasn't like we were playing pinball anymore. All of a sudden, it got a lot smoother. Because all of a sudden, we're looking forward to where we're going, not with where we are.

[23:09] This is how, as believers, we are to get so focused on Jesus that those other things push aside. We're to be so focused on what God has called us to do that we're not distracted with those other things.

How often do we as believers get so focused on the world around us that all we're doing is reacting to the world around us and getting tossed around by it? When what we really need to do is take our eyes off of this world and set our gaze, set our fix, set our eyes on Jesus.

And let that become our focus. Now, I'm not sure where everyone is in their walk with Christ today. I'm not sure where you are in that race that he set before us.

Some of you may not have started that race yet. You may be here today for the first time or maybe the thousandth time. I don't know. And you realize what you need to do today is stop trying to convince yourself that you're saved and start running the race and give your life to Jesus.

And then and only then can we begin to run with endurance. For others of us, we may be at different points in this race. Some of us are just starting off in this race and some of us are much, much further along in this race.

[24:24] But no matter where we are in this race, we must continually throw off sin. But ask the more serious question is what I'm doing helping me run.

But you see, this isn't just a question that we should be asking ourselves. It is a question that we must be constantly asking of the church. Are the things we are focused on helping us run?

Are we shaping our church to run better? Are we shaping our church to run for Christ, to look more like Christ? Are we trying to make it look more like ourselves and our preferences and our conveniences?

Are we living as a church in a way that's helping us run the race that God has called us to run? Are the things we are focused on helping us run? Are they helping produce endurance?

Are we focused on getting the gospel to those that need to hear it? Ultimately, the question that we must ask ourselves and us as a church is are we looking to Jesus?

[25 : 24] Because then and only then are we able to run like God has called us to run. Father, thank you so very much for your word. Thank you for what it teaches us.

Lord, thank you for the ways that it calls us out to live our lives. Thank you for the examples that you give us. Those faithful believers that we can look to and understand that they've ran this race well.

Help how they live their lives. Be an encouragement to us to live our lives in a way that looks to you.

And so, Lord, as we begin to think about how we live our lives, how we're running this race that you've called us to run, Lord, may we fix our eyes on you.

Help us to run well. And, Lord, I pray that there's someone here today that needs to get in the race, that they need to begin that relationship with you, that you would give them the boldness and clarity to understand that they need the relationship with you before they can begin to run.

And so, Lord, may we not try to convince ourselves that we're saved by our own actions, but look to you, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

[26 : 32] So, Lord, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you that we can look to you for salvation, and we can continue looking to you as we run this race. And so, Lord, give us the boldness, give us the strength to live for you.

We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to invite you to stand. We're going to sing a song of invitation this morning. If the Lord is speaking to you, won't you respond as we stand together and sing?

Thank you.