

# Hebrews 12:1-2

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Date: 28 December 2025

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Amen. Good morning. I hope you all had a lovely week this last week and a great Christmas, whatever that looks like for you and your family.

! Those of you who don't know me, I'm Noah. I'm the youth director here at Forth Memorial and Pastor Scott and Pastor Jay are both out of town this week. And so, as is tradition in thousands of churches across the U.S. this weekend every year, you get the youth guy today.

So, I am very thankful to Scott and Jay for entrusting me with the pulpit this morning. I do love their readiness to invest in others who wish to be proclaimers of God's Word. That's a real gift to this church.

Now, as I thought about what text I would preach on this morning, I felt that as we're reaching the end of another year, in the beginning of a new one, that it would be good to pause and take a look back and then take a look forward.

And a text that I think masterfully accomplishes this for us is the beginning of Hebrews chapter 12. But before we read, I do feel like I should say, I have never been one for New Year's resolutions.

[ 1 : 1 6 ]     And I recognize that as probably just a flaw in my character. Maybe I'm just too cynical for my age. But I have seen countless times, and I can testify of myself, the amount of Bible in a Year reading plans that start off so strong on January 1st.

And then the wheels just fall off as soon as you get to Leviticus. Or those of you with gym memberships. Get ready for things to be absolutely packed in the next five or six weeks or so.

But then February comes, Spokane gets colder and sadder, and there's no fun holidays unless you really consider Valentine's Day to be a holiday. And then all of a sudden, the treadmill's available again.

And I just think many of us can see that New Year's resolutions in general, at least maybe the way we treat them, can really just be a fickle thing. But at the same time, there is something genuine and admirable and real about resolving to go into a new year with a renewed focus or goals for personal growth.

We're just funny creatures in the way that we do it. Because we forget so easily that true change begins with the heart, not simple willpower. So instead of exhorting you this morning to make three resolutions going into this new year, which, if you want to do that, you have my full support, I want to look at our motivations.

[ 2 : 4 8 ]     And Lord willing, from there, we'll start to see how we can find the endurance that we often wish we had. So if you would turn in your copy of Scripture with me to Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1, we'll look at just the first two verses today.

Let's read. Let's pray as we begin.

Father, help us not to be cynical but earnest as we enter a new year. We pray that you would speak to our hearts by your word today.

Show us the things that you would have for us to lay aside. Feed us with your truth. Feed us with your promises. I ask that you would take anything unhelpful or incorrect that I might say and just let it fall to the floor.

And I just ask that you would be glorified in our time today, Father. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, the author of Hebrews begins chapter 12 by kind of putting an exclamation point on all of Hebrews chapter 11 that came before.

[ 4 : 15 ] So, surprise, this is actually a sermon on Hebrews 11. And people often call this the Hall of Faith, and you'll see why. Chapter 11 begins like this.

Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it, the people of old received their commendation.

By faith, we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. And the question being addressed here is, what really does faith mean?

And the other problem, running deeper than that, is the question of how those who lived before Christ could be saved. And the pattern of faith that the author of Hebrews identifies in such simplicity is one of seeing and hoping.

Seeing a reality that transcends, surpasses our present reality, and hoping for that reality with certainty that God will come through.

[ 5 : 21 ] That is what commends someone to God. That is what distinguishes the people of God. Look at verse 4 with me. By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts.

And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith, Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found because God had taken him. Now, before he was taken, he was commended as having pleased God.

And without faith, it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith, Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear, constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By this, he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.

And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith, he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

[ 6 : 38 ] For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

The idea that sticks in my mind when I look at the examples of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Sarah, is how each of them received a promise from the Lord and took hold of it in such a way that it became the guiding principle of their life.

When God told 75-year-old Abram, Abram, I'm going to make you a great nation. Now leave your homeland and I'll show you the way. He believed. And he took his family, his possessions, and he set off believing that God had prepared a better country.

And that's why Hebrews 11.10 tells us he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. Abram was certain of something he could not see, which was that God would prepare something unimaginably great for those who trust him.

[ 7 : 56 ] When God told Noah, Noah, I'm going to flood the earth. I want you to build an ark. He did it. It is not reasonable by human wisdom that a man should spend 120 years of his life building a giant boat to save his family and all the animals from a global flood.

But Noah believed the voice of the Lord, and against all reason, he devoted every ounce of his being to obeying God's command. Look down at verse 24.

By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith, he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

Brothers and sisters, don't let anyone deceive you saying that faith is a crutch for the weak and the afraid. No. Faith in the promises of God has led millions of Christians out of the world's comforts into chains and imprisonments, to the sword and fiery persecution, into the mouths of cannibals, into gas chambers, into poverty and starvation, all the while heralding and singing the glorious riches of Christ.

[ 9 : 26 ] The reproach of Christ is greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt. This is the story of Hebrews 11. The faithful ones took hold of God's promises with such seriousness, such nerve, such gut conviction that they were willing to be mocked and shamed and persecuted and sawn in half if it meant seeing the fulfillment of God's promise.

That's what faith looks like. We don't believe because believing makes us feel good. We believe because we are headed for a greater city and we will endure anything to see it with our own eyes.

So I pray that you will take hold of God's promises in that way in this new year because that is what it is to live by faith, to take hold of the promises of God and to run with them.

So let's talk about running with endurance. Verse 1 of chapter 12. Let us also lay aside every burden and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Here the author of Hebrews is encouraging us in the same way as the faithful ones before us to do everything in our power to leave behind all the things that hinder us from running to Jesus.

[ 10 : 48 ] And the picture of our passage today is something like laying aside one thing so that we can take up another. And I think the message is that we are to lay aside what distracts or misleads us as we run this race and we are to take up faith and assurance in the promises of God.

And I think we ought to notice the nature of this race. It is a race which requires endurance as the passage says. It is a race set before us as in this is a calling on every Christian.

If you are a believer this is not an optional opt-in kind of thing. This is rather the whole of the Christian life. And the Christian life as I see it here is a marathon of expectation.

Not a sprint. Not a jog. Not a relay race. But a marathon. And it is a marathon because it has already begun.

And it lasts until the day you see Christ face to face. And it is a marathon of expectation because your only fuel your only source of energy to sustain you as you run is confident expectation.

[ 12 : 00 ] Faith of what you can't see yet. Of a reward at the finish line which makes your pain and suffering and sacrifice worthwhile. So, understanding that we should take care to notice what hinders us as we run.

Because this is a marathon of expectation you ought to ask yourself what am I expecting? What am I hoping for in life? What slows me down?

Dampens my affections? What am I holding on to mindful or not that prevents me from running well? I think it's been a really sweet gift for us as a church these last few weeks to get to spend some time reflecting on the promises of God together.

I'm thankful to Pastor Jay for sharing something so close to his heart with us and I just love what a practical example that gives us of running the race with endurance.

Because what you believe truly what you see in your heart and your mind to be true will without fail determine the manner in which you run. And if you aren't holding on to the promises of God for dear life you will be holding on to lies.

[ 13 : 11 ] Maybe it sounds like this. My worth is found in the approval of others. Or maybe, Christian, you implicitly tell yourself it doesn't really matter if I sin because Jesus paid for it.

Maybe, on the flip side of that, your heart tells you if I work hard enough, serve enough, read enough, pray enough, I might just prove myself worthy of God's love.

Do you see how easy it is for our hearts to forget the depths of God's grace? And the lies don't just come from within. So while the sin and rebellion of our hearts tries to deceive us, we also have a whole world around us saying, you know, actually, you really need to listen to your feelings.

That's who you really are after all, and if you don't do what your heart tells you, you're really just being foolish. Christian, I want you to set your heart free. Stop believing lies when the truth is so much better than anything you could imagine.

Instead of harboring unbelief, ask yourself, could it really be true? Could God be so kind to me? God is not ashamed to be called your God.

[ 14 : 23 ] Hold on to that. He has prepared for you a city, so run toward it, even if you can't see it right now. There's another burden, which I'm sure we're all aware of, yet we often willingly subject ourselves to it when we desire ease, when we desire comfort, when we want to tune out the pains and longings of this world, and I'm, of course, talking broadly about escapism, distraction, especially in digital form, the overuse of screens and entertainment to disconnect ourselves from the world around us, and I know it can be hard.

I experience this almost every day, the pull to distract myself, to shut off, to disengage, but when it turns into hours of scrolling and numbing yourself to the world around you, what you're actually doing is not rest, is not restorative or refreshing.

You're burdening your mind and your soul in ways that your body was not designed to handle. We know more about the world, especially tragedies, wars, gossip, political drama, more than we ever have in human history.

Is that really good for us? Does reading constant, minute-by-minute updates about terror plots, conspiracies, natural disasters, draw your affections to Christ and his kingdom?

Do you find that endless scrolling is helping you or hindering you from taking every thought captive for Christ? Are you becoming a more loving, self-giving person as a result of the entertainment that you consume?

[ 16 : 00 ] And the reason I make such a point of it is this. Because the faith that sustains you as you run for Christ demands your imagination. It takes faith acting on, captivating the imagination for you to see the story of redemption being carried out in the world around you.

Once you see it and believe and long for the city of God that is being prepared for his people, you'll realize there's no need to clog up your imagination with anything else. In church, I love stories.

They cut right past our minds down to the heart. So take special care to notice who's telling them. The world wants your imagination not to raise it to the courts of heaven but to drag it down to earth or worse.

In the heart of what I'm saying is if we are running a marathon of expectation, hoping for what is not yet seen, laying aside every burden and entangling sin, we need to notice where we're putting our time and attention.

some of our most precious resources so that they can be subject to the Lord Jesus. I think it's significant that the author of Hebrews doesn't simply tell us to lay aside our sins.

[ 17 : 11 ] I mean, that part's kind of obvious, right? You're not going to run well if you're fueling yourself with unbelief and pride. You're not going to run well if you're pacifying yourself with junk entertainment and digital distractions.

But there are also burdens that aren't clearly sinful in the same way. There are decisions you make or don't make every day that have a profound effect on the focus and the stamina you have as you run.

And that's why I think it's all the more important that we let our vision of the finish line, of Christ standing and waiting to welcome us into a new heaven and a new earth with him that we let eternity sit at the forefront of our minds.

Christian, you have freedom with how you use your time. You have freedom with how you use your money. Don't mistake that. Now, there are very obvious constraints on both of those things.

But within the boundaries, you have room to make your own decisions. But you will bear the fruit of those decisions, good and bad. So you can use your time in ways that strengthen you and feed your soul as you run with endurance.

[ 18 : 18 ] But you can also waste it. You can spend your money to increase your capacity for good, to feed and support a family, to cultivate beauty in the world. But you can also waste it and misuse it and oftentimes end up burdening yourself with the fruit of foolishness.

We need wisdom. Wisdom to know what burdens we need to let go of, what burdens we should avoid putting on ourselves altogether. Wisdom to know how and when to use the resources we've been given because we can't afford to run this race with a heavy load.

And if you'll allow me to mix analogies, you also can't do it on an empty tank. Remember, Christian, that the fuel that keeps you running the race of the Christian life is blood-bought confidence in the promises of God.

It's the truth of the gospel and the hope of a new heavens and a new earth that is meant to sustain you, faithful until the end. Look at Hebrews 11, verse 13. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

[ 19 : 45 ] Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. You see, it was the firm belief of an invisible reality, the fact that they actually did not belong to this world, that caused them to obey God above man.

They were seeking a homeland, not knowing the destination, but knowing that the God who led them was true. And by the kindness of God, we who live after Christ's coming know the destination.

We know the glory that's coming. It's as if God couldn't help himself but to peel back the curtain just a little bit. Like for many of you, when your parents would let you open just one present on Christmas Eve, God is so pleased.

His heart is so filled with joy to prepare your eternal home for you and to know that you are eagerly running toward and waiting for that home. So do not be ashamed to desire a better country.

That's your hope. That's your expectation. And Christian, your longings for heaven and the faith that sustains you as you run for it are a sweet and beautiful thing to your heavenly Father.

[ 20 : 53 ] When you suffer against sin and the temptations of the world because you believe the promises of God and are holding out for a better home, God is pleased to be called your God.

We run for a joy set before us, one we can't see yet. And in this way, we imitate Christ, which brings us to our last verse. 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.

And this is what it was always leading to. Because although our ancestors in the faith served a shadow of promises made by a faithful God, they did not know who would bring the fulfillment of God's promises, who would guide them into a greater and perfect land, who would bring healing to the stain of sin on humanity.

But we have tasted and seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is the one we look to. He is the ultimate promise of God fulfilled. And he is the treasure that awaits you at the finish line.

[ 22 : 06 ] He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. And don't miss these words. The founder and perfecter of our faith. Because although, yes, I've been hammering on the point that we need endurance.

Yes, we need gut conviction in what is not seen. Yes, we need stamina to finish the race well. The greatest promise? Jesus says, I am your endurance. I am the author of your faith.

And I will finish what I started. That's the perfecter of our faith. And the word perfecter here could also be understood completer. Yes, this race requires 100% of your effort.

But the promise of God for you, he will completely supply you with his power. And he will finish his work. And I am sure of this, says Paul in Philippians chapter 1, verse 6, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

So my encouragement to you, church, is to strain ahead with all of your efforts. Despise the shame as Jesus did. And the word despise communicates this idea of considering something to be of little importance.

[ 23 : 18 ] If we believe what God tells us is waiting for us at the end of this life, no amount of personal discomfort or earthly pain or shame could ever possibly compare to that.

And laying down our burdens and wrestling against sin is painful. We suffer to run well. But I don't think anyone could ever say it better than the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 8, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

So as we leave today and we enter a new year in just a few days, I want you to ask yourself, what do you need to leave at the starting line this year? What unnecessary burden is proving to be more of a distraction than a source of life and truth?

What lies about yourself, about God, about the world are you believing? What besetting sin needs to die? And then I want you to consider each day what promise of God am I taking hold of today?

And then I want you to take it and run with it. I'll close with the words of 2 Peter chapter 1 verses 3 and 4. Let's pray.

[ 25 : 00 ] Amen. Father, would you give us the confidence in who you are, the confidence in your love to be able to give you our burdens, to lay down our burdens on you, to kill sin.

We ask that you would take our imaginations captive with the truth of your word, enable us by your spirit to run with endurance, and help us to hold fast to the promise that you will finish the work that you started.

We love you, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.