

Persevering in Faith

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[0 : 00] Now we turn to the passage that we read, the letter to the Hebrews on chapter 12 and at the beginning of the chapter. 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.

Look into 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. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. The last chapter of this letter gives us a hint about the purpose that the writer had in putting down the words of this letter.

Verse 22 of chapter 13, I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

You might translate these words, bear with my word of encouragement, and throughout the letter, you find numerous exhortations are given.

[1 : 48] For example, in chapter 2 and verse 1, therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

And there is the implication that neglect by those to whom the letter originally written causes drifting.

If I can use a small illustration, you know, if you are into gardening, you just have to leave your garden for a little while, fold your arms, do nothing, and you will often, you will soon see the effect of your neglect of the garden.

There will be weeds everywhere. In chapter 4, verse 1, there is another exhortation, therefore while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear, lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Chapter 6, verse 1, therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity and laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.

[3 : 09] Chapter 10, verse 23, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

And these are just some of the examples of exhortation that you'll find in this letter to the Hebrews. And in our text this evening, we have another.

Run with endurance the race that is set before you. And the illustration of the life of a believer as a race occurs several times in the New Testament.

Paul uses it on several occasions. For example, in the book of Acts, I do not count my life of any value, not as precious to myself.

If only I may finish my course. If only I may finish my race. In writing to the Corinthians, do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

[4 : 24] So run that you may obtain it, he writes. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable one, and then he says, for I do not run aimlessly.

In other words, he comes, he runs with a fixed goal in view. He runs with concentration and determination towards the end goal.

Writing to the Philippians, one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straying forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

And then writing to Timothy, as he sees the end of life approaching, he combines the imagery of a battle and a race.

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering. The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race.

[5 : 42] I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. Well, I think it is obvious that the words of our text are not referring to physical exercise of actual running. If it did, I think many of us would be excluded from the race because of our inability to run much. Perhaps some of us are the rage. Well, first of all, there is a great exhortation to persevere. Note how it is expressed. Let us run with endurance.

What do we understand from the term that is used here? Well, what I understand from it is this, that you are asked to run with perseverance. In other words, that you continue in the race until the end. That is a strand of thought that also occurs elsewhere in the New Testament. You will be hated by all, says Jesus, for my name's sake.

[6 : 55] But the one who endures or who perseveres to the end will be saved. In John's Gospel, you find Christ saying, if you abide or if you persevere in my word, you are truly my disciples.

Paul, writing to the Colossians, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue, if indeed you persevere in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel that you heard. God now, that is not to say that that is in any way at variance with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, in case somebody is thinking that thought mischievously, because these words are laying emphasis on the need for perseverance in the life of the believer.

and so the idea here is not running, as it were, a hundred meter sprint race, but that the life of the Christian has been compared in many ways to a marathon race, the race that takes time.

And you would run that race very differently to what the sprinter runs. In a sprint race, the sprinter is determined to run it as fast as he can.

[8 : 50] The marathon runner also has a goal and he is seeking to better his time, but the point of the marathon is that you have to pace yourself throughout the race.

And so the metaphor that is used here and the picture that is used here is more of a marathon race where the author is implying we are to run with endurance.

It's a race. It's not an afternoon stroll. And the longer the race, the more things can go wrong.

In a natural race, some pull up because of injury, pulled muscles, and so on. Others stumble and they get knocked off their stride.

Some become dehydrated and they collapse. Paul compliments the Galatians on their entering the race.

[9 : 55] He says, you were running well. And then he asks, what hindered you from obeying the truth? In other words, what was it that prevented you from obeying the gospel?

It's not just enough to know the gospel, it has to be obeyed, it has to be practiced. And John Stott makes the shrewd observation, our creed is expressed in our conduct, and our conduct is derived from our creed.

Well, obviously the race can be very stressful. Some of you know all too well, little words at the end of verse three, so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.

And that is sometimes how we might feel in the race, weary and faint hearted. And that way may well describe someone here this evening.

You're weary, and you're in danger of becoming and yielding to faint heartedness. Is the writer saying to counter that, that you need to try harder, that you need to work harder, that you need to do more?

[11 : 23] Is that the implication? Well, I don't believe that's what he's saying. That would be to turn the gospel on its head.

Remember, the language that he employs, one with endurance, the race that is set before us. It is something that has been mapped out for us.

It's been planned for us. And you know how Paul writes to the Ephesians, that by grace you have been saved through faith, not your own doings, the gift of God, not ourselves to works, so that no one may boast.

Then you remember he goes on to say that although we are saved by grace apart from the works of the law, we are saved unto good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

In other words, the race is all of grace from beginning to end. The race that we are to endure, the race that we are to run, is a race that God has set out before every believer, has planned for every believer from before the foundation of the world.

[12:41] There are places where you are to go, and I don't mean destinations on a map, but rather situations and challenges that you have to confront.

You don't know what these might be, much as you might like to know. You don't know the twists and turns that you may be called on to make in the race that you are called to run.

You are merely asked to persevere in faith wherever the race, wherever God leads you in the race. He wants us, in other words, to look at the text, to draw motivation and power and stamina for endurance from the one upon whom we focus, from Jesus, looking unto Jesus.

Why should you be looking unto Jesus? Because you are in union with Jesus, because you are a forgiven sinner, because all the guilt of your sin has been erased by Jesus.

[13:58] You are loved in Jesus. You are special in Jesus. You are adopted children in Jesus. And so he says, run with endurance.

It's not to do more in the sense of find some inner strength that lies within you. He's not asking you, as it were, to dig deep down within yourself to find some hidden resources that you have not hither to expend it.

He's not saying you're saved by grace, and then the race is up to you. You run the race leaning on him.

You don't do a drawing on your own resources because you have none. that is, you're running because you're in union with Christ.

You're running because your sins are forgiven. You're running because all the obstacles have been mapped out before you. There isn't an obstacle in the race or a hurdle in the race.

[15:07] You know, sometimes in hurdle races, you wonder how the hurdler manages to keep his rhythm because he's going over these hurdles between every so many steps in the race.

And if they lose their rhythm, they crash into the hurdles and the hurdles fall. Well, every hurdle in your race and mine has been mapped out by the Lord.

And over and against these hurdles, are his promises, his covenants, and his blood shed for you. Looking unto Jesus because Jesus knows the race. That's the great exhortation that we are given in order to persevere.

And it's like that every day. Every day you're in the race. Every day you're to look to Jesus. It involves endurance.

[16:20] It involves perseverance. You know, in marathons, the runners speak, I've never run a marathon physically. I've run long distance running, but never a marathon.

But marathon runners speak of going through the pain barrier. I'm not sure at what stage in the race. But then when you go through the pain barrier, you can see the end.

And there are times in the spiritual race too, where you are going through the pain barrier. And all of that is for your good.

Look to Jesus every step of the way. That's the first thing that's in this exhortation. But then there's warnings about deterrence to perseverance.

And he speaks of two. Lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. When you look up commentators on this passage, some are divided.

[17:36] Is he talking about two separate things? Or is the writer speaking about one thing? In my own mind, I prefer to go with the view of two different things.

That, first of all, there's the weight that you lay aside. the imagery that the writer is presenting to us here is of runners in an arena.

And they divested themselves of their clothing. You know how in modern day races, the runners are in their tracksuits until it comes time for them to go into the starting block.

And then they divest themselves of their tracksuits and they have the streamlined racing clothing on. Well, it seems to me that the writer here is talking about things that have to be laid aside.

Lay aside every weight. In other words, things that have a tendency to slow you down in the race. And it seems to me not just that slow you down but that sap your strength.

[18:56] Because when you're in a race, and you have too much clothing on, not only does it slow you down, but it saps the strength that you have.

And it seems to me that the weights that are spoken of here that you are to lay aside are not just something that are cumbersome, but they sap your spiritual strength.

It seems to me that it's not necessarily things that are sinful in themselves, things that are legitimate. If I can use a simple illustration, for example, if you were running in a race, you wouldn't

wear the boots that you wear if you go for a walk on the moon, or out into the hills, or even along a beach.

you wouldn't even wear, and maybe this tells you something about me, you wouldn't wear your Sunday shoes. I don't know if people today have Sunday shoes, but I grew up with the thing of Sunday shoes.

There were shoes I would hardly ever wear any other day except on Sundays. Not that it would be wrong to wear them on a Monday.

[20 : 19] So you see, laying aside every weight is things that may be legitimate in themselves, and yet that are sapping your spiritual strength.

You know, sometimes people ask the question, what's wrong with this, or what's wrong with that? And it seems to me that's the wrong question to ask.

It's not how the Bible would approach the situation. The Bible would approach the situation and say, does this decision that I've made, does it, as it were, help me and enable me to become a better Christian?

That's the question. It's not, can I do this, or can I do that? And very often, the spirit in which that is asked is invariably wrong.

It says, it seems to say, what's the least I can get away with and still regard myself as a Christian? That's not how the Bible approaches it.

[21 : 31] The Bible approaches it by saying, will this help me to be a better Christian, a more spiritual Christian? And anything that hinders spiritual progress should be discarded?

No, it can be any amount of things in our life, and it saps our spiritual energy.

Everybody will know in their own life what it is that is in your life that saps your spiritual energy and takes you away from the focus and the race.

I have a pension. Since I retired, I didn't have the time before I retired, but since I retired, I spend a lot of time, perhaps more time than I should, watching Parliament on the Parliament Channel.

I'm just fascinated by the way people debate in Parliament and how they react in Parliament. And sometimes I say to my wife, I'm spending far more time listening to these, often which is rubbish rather than be sitting with some good book or with the Bible at my age and day when I'm getting near to the end of life's journey.

[23 : 03] And, you know, it's legitimate enough in itself, but it's not giving me any spiritual strength to go further in the race. And you may find things in your own life that are hindrances to your spirituality in the race.

And the advice that we are given by the Bible is put it to one side. Ditch whatever it is that is causing a hindrance to your spiritual development and the race.

If it's leaving you, as it were, without growth in your life. Because you have to ask yourself, am I more advanced today in spirituality than I was a year ago?

or am I regressing? So, there are things which are, yes, legitimate in themselves, but the secret to running the race is to cast these things aside.

And you notice also what he says, the sin which clings so closely. and the imagery that I see there is that it is there and it's so close to you that you're not observing it.

[24 : 40] That the sin adheres to you in such a way that you're unaware that the sin is there. You know, just a little example, you know, sometimes a person may unintentionally they may speak very loudly and you may be saying to you in your own mind, are they noticing how they've spoken?

And maybe they didn't. It's totally unintentional on their part. And so, sometimes we have to listen to those who knows really well.

Maybe a friend, maybe your husband or your wife. and they'll tell you there's this or that. And of course, your inclination is immediately to get all defensive, isn't it?

And your hackers go up. Rather than seeking to be delivered from whatever it is that is adhering so closely to you that you haven't really noticed that it's there.

you know, sin is so deceptive, isn't it, by its very nature. So deceptive the way it ingratiates itself into our lives that we don't really notice that it's there.

[26 : 09] And so we have to ask help from the Most High to cast it away. because the aim of the race is this, to be more like Jesus.

That's the goal. That's, that's, the major goal in the race is to be like Christ, to be conformed to the image of Christ.

And so we have to lay aside every weight. And even those things that we may legitimately regard as our liberties.

And you know how the, the Westminster Confession, how it, God alone is the, the Lord of the conscience has left it free from doctrines and commandments of men.

That is true. There are liberties. But are these liberties helping us to be better and brighter Christians? sins and those sins that we are not seeing anymore because they become such an integral part of our character.

[27 : 22] They're a hindrance to endurance. John Owen, the great Puritan, perhaps one of the greatest theologians, used to say something like this, let not that man think that he makes any true progress in, any progress in true holiness who does not walk over the bellies of his lusts.

It's a very graphic turn of phrase. Let not that man think that he makes any progress in true holiness who does not walk over the bellies of his lusts.

Well, there is a warning, not only an exhortation to run, but there's a warning about the things that may prevent us running.

And then finally, there are encouragements to persevere. And the first is this, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Now, you notice, therefore, since we are surrounded, the therefore links the writing in this chapter with what has preceded in chapter 11.

[28 : 52] It's a very important link word in the Bible. He's talking about the gallery of the faithful.

And you notice, the eminent saints, Old Testament saints, whom he mentions in that chapter. There are so many of them.

Some would say that they are there watching over the runners. you know how in the book of Revelation hints in Revelation chapter 6, those who are on the other side know what's going on here and there.

They're watching, not in the sense of condemnation, but in the sense of the willing you to persevere in the race.

I'm not wholly persuaded in my own mind of that line reasoning. But that is what some will say. And I do remember talking to an elderly saint shortly before he passed to his eternal rest.

[30 : 05] And he said to me, when I asked him how he was, he was in residential care at that time, I'm waiting for the ferry, and my fare is paid.

And I said to him, do you think you'll see revival before you go? Oh, he said, I don't know about that, but I do know if it comes.

I shall participate in rejoicing in it. And from that I deduced that he was basing his comment on the fact that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

But it seems to me that the witnesses that are spoken of here, they are not so much witnesses of us, but witnesses to us.

And there's quite a distinction. Not so much look looking on us, but setting us an example in the way that they lived, in the way that their lives were lived in faith and dependency upon God.

[31 : 32] And you remember how the chapter, how it begins with the very first saint who is mentioned, able offer to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain through which he was commended as righteous.

And though he died, he still speaks. In other words, he is pointing forward to the great sacrifice in his life to which we look back and through whom we are made acceptable unto God.

The acceptable, the acceptable sacrifice of the Lamb of God. And so you have these great saints mentioned and you notice in almost the life of every one of them, without exception, the race had many hurdles and many difficulties and many trials.

Did that mean that they didn't persevere? No. They lived and they waited in faith upon God.

As those who were persuaded of a city that has foundations whose builder and founder is God.

[33 : 04] That's one source of encouragement. The lives of the Old Testament saints. But there's another source of encouragement and I've already referred to it.

Looking unto Jesus and the writer uses two words. The founder and perfecter of our faith. The founder. It's not a very, I don't think, a good translation.

means the forerunner or the pioneer. It's a word that means the trailblazer, the one who goes before, the one who clears the path.

You know, if you think of a platoon of soldiers in the jungle and whoever is the platoon commander, he leads by example so that the rest follow.

The one who has gone before. And this is the example that is set before us here as the major source of encouragement in the race.

[34 : 14] He's the one who's gone before. You know, you're tempted to grow weary. You're tempted to become faint-hearted. it.

Sometimes you're in the dark, you're walking in darkness and you can see no light. And you're as it were down on your hands and knees in the pitch darkness and you feel around on the soil that's beneath you and there's a footprint and it's the footprint of the one who has gone before you to open the way.

He even went into the grave before you so that the grave would not be a place that you might feel it to be.

He went in there and he conquered that too and he left a fragrance there. It's the footprint of the trail blazer. he's gone through in order that we too might go through.

We do not have says the writer here a high priest who cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities but was in all points tempted like as we are.

[35 : 42] That's the one who were to look to. That's the one who were encouraged to put our trust in. And then he's the finisher or as it is here the perfecter.

You know some of you will remember just by way of illustration when we had local tweed mills in Stornoway there was one department and it was called the finishing department in the mill.

It was one thing to have a tweed woven and returned from the weaver. And then it was washed and so on.

But then it had to go into the finishing. And in the finishing department those who were employed in the finishing department they picked out all the little details to make the tweed more perfect.

They corrected any flaws that might be found in the tweed. and that is what is said here about Jesus. He's the perfecter.

[36 : 53] He's the one who erases the flaws. So ultimately at the end of the race they are without flaw and without error made perfect by him.

He begins the work he finishes the work and it's grace all the way. And you see what was the motivation for Jesus?

Because this is your motivation too. Look at what the text says. For the joy that was set before him the joy of being as it were back in the father's house hearing the words well done my beloved son. And when you are tempted to grow weary and faint hearted because the race is difficult and tough because there are setbacks because things happen that you never expected that you didn't see coming that may have changed the whole course of your life.

Oh well remember the finisher has a purpose in all of these things because he has purposed to make you perfect.

[38 : 27] And so this evening we are asked to look to him. Perhaps you have taken your eye of Jesus. You remember when Jesus fed the thousands he sent the disciples in a boat across the sea of Galilee.

He went up into a mountain to pray and the storm broke out on the sea of Galilee in the middle of the night. And you remember in the fourth watch of the night Jesus comes walking on the water. Some of the disciples think it's a spirit of some sort. And Peter says this let me come to you. And he steps out of the boat and he begins to walk on the waves.

I don't know if Peter had any teaching in the laws of physics but he begins to become aware of the water and the waves.

Takes his eyes off Jesus and he begins to sink. And so the lesson is for everyone in the race don't take your eyes off Jesus.

[39 : 41] Don't take your eyes off Jesus. As the hymn writer puts to Jesus the very thought of thee with sweetness fills my breast but sweeter far thy face to see and in thy presence rest.

Let us run the race with patience or with endurance that is set before us.

Amen. Let us pray.