

Running the Race

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Preacher: Rev John Maclean

[0 : 00] I want to turn your thoughts to Hebrews chapter 12 and the words that we have there, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Hebrews chapter 12, let us run with endurance or let us run with patience the race that is set before us.

It is often said that the Christian life is a race from start to finish. Every believer, everyone born again by God's spirit is running this race.

It is the Christian race. We are not told that this race is going to be easy. We are not even promised that this race is going to be easy.

In fact, from time to time we face the ups and the downs. We face the tests and the trials as we run the race that is before us.

[1 : 13] But we know from the word of God that it is a blessed way. It is a blessed race. And it has a wonderful end in sight.

Now the verses that we read, they speak about two main things. And I have ordered them in such a way that it will be easy for you to remember.

You see, the verses speak about the believers who have gone to heaven. The believers who have gone to heaven.

But it also speaks about the believers who are going to heaven. So we keep these two thoughts in our minds.

The believers who have gone to heaven and the believers who are going to heaven. First of all then, the believers who have gone to heaven.

[2 : 18] And what we know about them, well, a number of things. But the first is this. They have finished their race. And in the chapter we read, we are reminded about these heroes.

These heroines of faith. Their race is run. And all that is taught us in chapter 11, you might say, it comes to a peak.

It comes to a point. And we have this word, therefore. And then after that we have these words about the great cloud.

In other words, those who have gone on to heaven, they have finished their race. And we are reminded that they are a vast number.

They are witnesses. That's what God's word tells us. Now, not in the sense that they are watching everything that we do. There may be, to a degree, this idea that they know what is going on.

[3 : 30] But the point is this. These witnesses, they are the proof of the faithfulness of God. They have finished their faith.

They have finished their race. And they knew what it was to be strengthened by the Lord when they felt so weak and so helpless.

They knew in a very special way the Lord drawing near to them to uphold them. To make them strong. Like David, they felt that they could run and leap over the wall.

They proved the faithfulness of God day by day when he strengthened them. But also, they proved the faithfulness of God when he met their need.

And I'm sure every one of them would say this. We lacked nothing from the Lord. We can say that.

[4 : 34] And the Lord has met our need. Not our greed. In other words, the Lord supplied their need.

All that was necessary as they ran this race. In a physical, I believe in a material, and especially in a spiritual way, that need was met.

God met that need. But also, he satisfied the desires that they had. Now I want us to think about it from this point of view. Those who have gone on before us, as they journeyed through this life,

there were times when they felt a deep desire within their hearts.

A longing for God. A longing for the place of prayer. A longing to witness. A longing to have fellowship with the Lord and with his people.

These desires were there. Desires that God had placed within their hearts. And God satisfied their desires.

[5 : 44] But also, these people, they proved the faithfulness of God when the Lord held the enemy at bay.

In other words, he subdued the enemy. Oh, there were times when the enemy could have run riot. There were times when these people were so aware of the enemy coming near to them.

But at the same time, he was only allowed to go so far because the Lord has subdued the enemy.

These are the witnesses. Now, there are lots of things that motivate the Christian. But surely, this is a tremendous motivation that we have.

These cloud of witnesses. They are the people who have run the race. They are those who have finished that race. And what they are saying to us is this.

[6 : 47] We finished. So can you. God took care of them. Then God will take care of us.

In other words, they finished their race. Another way to look at it is this. They were regarded as faithful in the end.

And I like to think of the words that are penned for us there. Well done, good and faithful servant. Faithful to the end.

Now, from the chapter we read and from the experiences of those people who have gone before us, from our own experiences, we know that there are times of suffering.

Things were not always easy. There were times when they, as well as us, we had slips on the way.

[7 : 52] We are reminded, yes, God had set that standard. But we failed to reach to it. And sometimes in drastic ways. And these people, I'm sure, as they were running this race, they were aware of their failings and their faults.

but God had taken all of that into control when he planned the race for them.

But also, I'm sure some of those who have gone on before, oh, they felt within themselves, they felt that they were slowing down.

Maybe it was old age, maybe it was infirmity, but they felt, oh, we're not what we once were. We're not as bright as we once were.

We don't seem to be as faithful as we once were. We feel that we've slowed down. But in reality, they hadn't. They were regarded as faithful in the end.

[8 : 57] You see, they did not stop. Why? Because the Lord was with them. And the Lord was enabling them to keep on running the race that was set before them.

A third thing to remember about those who have gone on before, it's not just they have finished their race. It's not just how they are regarded at the end of the race.

But you know, they are forever with the Lord. Enjoying the inheritance that is prepared for them.

Those rewards that God had for them, they're enjoying that, they're forever with the Lord.

And they are meeting those, they met those who have gone on before. When you think of that, one day, every believer everyone who is running this race, that race is going to come to an end.

We're going to be with the Lord, and we'll see all those who have gone on before us. And the word of God reminds us that at that time, there'll be those who will come bringing their sheaves with them.

[10 : 21] That person who prayed for you, that person who witnessed to you, that person who preached to you, that person that was an example to you, you're going to meet all of those, your loved ones, parents, grandparents, generations past, and you'll meet with them there, and you'll all, will all be forever with the Lord.

It's very interesting, the story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus. all Lazarus was crying out for help. Rather, the rich man was crying out for help, send Lazarus.

And the Lord reminded him in this story, in this parable, that he can't leave where he is. Not that he would want to, but he couldn't leave where he was, forever with the Lord.

And then when you think of that, a fourth thing to remember is this, that for all the believers who have gone on to heaven, they are free, freed, from all sickness, from all illness, from all hindrances, and so on.

Anything that was a hindrance, anything that got them down, all of that, they are free from it. They are with the Lord.

[11 : 55] They have finished their race. The believers who have gone on before, they are regarded as faithful to the end. They are forever with the Lord, and they are free from all hindrances.

But then in the second place, I want us to think about the believers who are going to heaven. Now, the word of God makes that so clear.

Every believer is on their way to heaven. He says, let us run. Who are the people who are running this race?

Who are the people that are involved in this race? The people who belong to God. You don't belong to your old master, you belong to God.

You have been born again by the Spirit of God. You're running this race. And when you think of it, and when you think of the numbers of folk here, some began at different stages.

[13 : 06] Some might have been very young. Some might have been very old when they started running this race, but they are on this race.

And the Lord says to each one, let us run. We are the people involved in this race. Not the hypocrite, not the unbeliever, but everyone who knows and who trusts in him.

And we are told that they are to run the race that is set before us. In other words, as the believer is running this race, as we are making our way to heaven, there's a progress that is expected.

And the way that the writer puts it is this, that race that has been put out for you. You think of the past, and you're thinking of the race that you have been running.

The race that you have run has been prepared just for you. And again, we have to let that sink into our hearts.

[14 : 25] God, the Lord God of heaven, prepared that race for you. Or there may have been more ups and downs in your race.

there may have been many obstacles, hurdles in your race. But you run the race that God has planned. Sometimes we use the expression, well that's what's put out for you.

But it's far better for us to say, that which God planned, we are to run that race, and we are reminded we run it with perseverance.

But you know when you're thinking of that, what requires self-control, it requires submission.

And maybe today you're sitting here and you're saying, Lord, this part of the race is tough. You might be saying, this part of the race is a struggle.

[15 : 33] But it was the race that God put out for you. He is alongside you. He would never leave you. He would never, ever forsake you.

I was speaking to someone recently, and the way she put it was this. She was talking about the Christian race. How tough. How tough.

And at times it is tough. At times it might be hard going. At times we might feel, and sometimes we do, is the Lord in this or is he not?

But the Lord is in it because he has prepared that way. And we are told that we are to run that race. And when the Word of God is speaking about running, it speaks about an ongoing activity.

I remember when we were training for either football or shinty or whatever, training sometimes involved running, but running on the spot.

[16 : 42] You weren't going anywhere, and in a sense all you were doing running on the spot.

That's not what is being referred to here. Not running backwards and sometimes in any game, there are times when you feel you have to run backwards.

Maybe you had to run sideways, maybe in circles, but in the Christian race, it's an ongoing activity. we keep on going. And what does that mean? It means this, that you don't doubt that you have started.

If you believe that the Lord has reached down to you and blessed you, if you believe that you are going to heaven because of what the Lord has done by grace in your heart, or there may be times when you do slow down and there may be times when you have slips, but you don't doubt that you have started.

And when you have started, you keep on going. You don't delay, but also you live by the rules, and I'll be saying more about that at some other time.

[18 : 02] The rules are there to be obeyed. God's word, remember, our only rule to direct us, how we might live for him, and how we might glorify him, the rule that he has given to us.

But then we are told that as we run, we are to lay aside every weight. Now that speaks about putting things aside, and in a sense it's like putting off your coat.

And there are two words, that I like to use with regard to this. There are things that we have to avoid. There are things from which we have to abstain.

Now some of these things may be legitimate in themselves, but if we discover that these things are hindering us, then we are to lay aside them.

If they are hindering our progress, if we are not getting on as well as we ought to, then we put that to the side. Anything that hinders our effort.

[19 : 20] I want you to think of one particular thing. Even that which could cause my brother to stumble.

stumble. Even that which could cause my brother to stumble. You put it to the side. You lay it aside. Or think of it another way. When you would rather have friendship with the world rather than have fellowship with God, something wrong.

And surely what we desire is this, that we have this fellowship with him. Now, he uses this expression, the sin which clings so closely.

Or literally, that wraps itself around us. Some of you ladies will understand cling wrap and what it can do and how it can, you know, take you in and hold on to you and so on.

[20 : 24] But there are two ways to look at this. It's the sins which easily entangle us. Now, you know that.

But also, the sins for which you make excuse. Well, it's not really as bad as that person sin.

I couldn't really help it. It was the circumstances. Remember Adam and Eve. What did they do? when God challenged them?

Adam said, the woman you gave, you gave to be with me. The excuse, blaming someone else. And in Adam's case, he blamed God. And sometimes we forget about the sloth, the jealousy, the anger, the pride, the criticism, things that are always in our mind, those things that we talk about over and over again, those things that so easily cling to us, they wrap themselves around us.

[21 : 44] We are reminded that not only do we lay aside every weight, anything that hinders, but anything that holds us back, we put to the side.

Now, in lots of cases, you would say in all cases, we have to come to that place where we seek not just the help of God, but where we are seeking the forgiveness of God.

And maybe you've got a very active mind. And maybe there are things going on in your mind that you wouldn't want anybody else to know about. You bring it to that place of confession.

And we are reminded when we confess our sins, no matter what they are, and when we're doing that in all sincerity, we have that promise that the Lord is so willing to forgive.

And if you believe that there are certain sins in your life that God can't deal with, or that God can't forgive, then you are making God a liar.

[22 : 57] And you might be thinking to yourself, ah, but that sin, it's there, it's clinging to me, I can't do anything about it. And you could be saying, and God can't help me.

You're making God a liar. But then he uses this word perseverance, patience. that's despite the difficulties, the tests, and all those trials, and all those tears, despite them, we go on persevering. Somebody once said, why do Christians go on? Because God keeps them. But think of it another way. We persevere because we are being preserved.

The Lord is the one who keeps us. And we are reminded that we are within the hollow of his hand. And nothing is able to separate us from that.

And I think one of the most precious doctrines that we have from the word of God, I give to them eternal life. and they shall never perish.

[24 : 19] So no matter what's going on, despite the difficulties, then we're going on. We are running with patience. But then I want us to think about something else.

It's not just all the people who are involved in this race. It's not just what is expected as they run the race, the progress as expected. but the person to whom we look.

And the way it is put, let us fix our eyes on Jesus. As you are preparing for the table, as we meet around his word, and as we meet around the table, God willing, on his day, that we will be enabled more and more to fix our eyes on him.

remember Peter, when he was walking on the water, he looked to the Saviour as he was walking on the water.

And that, as he looked to Christ, that made him more aware of the presence and the power of the Saviour.

[25 : 36] And when Peter took that first step over the edge of the boat, and when Peter began to walk across the water, he kept his eyes on Christ.

He was looking to Jesus. But also, it's not just that he was made more aware of the presence of the Lord, but as he fixed his eyes on Jesus, he was less anxious about what surrounded him, the wind, the water, the waves, that didn't bother him. He was less anxious about that when he fixed his eyes on Christ.

But then what happened? He looked at the sea. When he looked to the Saviour, things were going well, but he looked to the sea.

In other words, he looked away from Christ. We don't know how far he got, but he looked away from Christ and as someone, quoting Spurgeon, Spurgeon's supposed to have said, the faith that buoyed him up gave place to a fear that bowed him down.

[26 : 52] What was Peter's problem? His attitude, his attention, that had changed.

he became anxious. He thought he was going to sink. He thought he was going to go down. And as someone else said, what he thought was going over him was actually under the feet of Christ.

The Lord was in control. Now as I said earlier, we don't look to the witnesses. witnesses. We are, they are tremendous, it's tremendous for us to think about them.

They testify of faith. We love their memory. We love the example they left us.

But the greatest one, the greatest example is Christ. We fix our eyes on him. He ran his race. He ran it well.

[28 : 04] He finished the course. That which was laid down for him. We look to him. So that's what we do. But then the question often arises, why?

Why do we do this? Why are we encouraged to look to Christ? Because he started you on this race, the author of our faith.

We fix our eyes on the one who commenced this work of grace within us. The one who enabled us to look to Christ.

And when you think of that, that is something wonderful. There was nothing of yourself that commended yourself to him. there was nothing that you could do that would bring favor from the Savior.

He was the author. He was the one that began to work within your heart, within your life. And he began this work through the power of God, the Holy Spirit.

[29 : 20] Your mind, your heart, opened, enlightened. the work of God's grace. Now for some, you might think, well, when did this work begin?

Only God knows that exactly. And you might be pointing back to a particular day, a particular night, a particular church, a particular sermon, a particular preacher, and so on.

That could be the time when you were awakened. that could have been the time when the Lord gave you the assurance that you were his. But he's the one who knows exactly when.

As we reminded yesterday, the one when he took us from darkness to light. And as the word of God says, from the power of Satan into the power of God.

It was only God's power that could do that. And this work is within all the people of God. It's not an outward act.

[30 : 27] It's not stopping doing certain things and then doing other things. It is something that has begun an inner spiritual work.

Why do we look to him? Why are we encouraged to look to him? Because he started us on that race. But then there's a second thing.

We look to him because we are reminded the perfecter of our faith. He sanctifies us on that race.

But more than that, he supports us.

He strengthens us. In other words, we continue to look to the one who continues to work this work within us.

That's why we look to him. Because of what he does. and because of what he is doing. Now, I want us to just think about this for a moment.

[31 : 27] God, the Holy Spirit, is working within us. There are two words. The word refining. To make us a more holy, more Christ-like people.

The word renewing. That's what he does. the gradual development in our life.

A life of consecration to God. That is the work that is going on. And as we are running this race, we are looking to the one who is sanctifying us.

He is supporting us, he is strengthening us, but he sanctifies us so that we become more and more like him. You know, there are times when the rough edges may be broken off.

Times when all there are things within our hearts and minds that ought not to be there. And the Lord deals with that. And it may not be a pleasant experience to experience the hammer and the chisel from the Lord, but it is in order to make us more like him.

[32 : 45] It may be a lengthy process. This is something that may be around the dinner table today or tomorrow, something you can think about.

It's a lengthy process. It never reaches perfection in this life, but there are ways in which the believer cooperates.

Now just think of that. As the Lord, by the power of the Spirit, is seeking to make us a more holy and a more sanctified people, there are ways in which the believer, who is on his way to heaven, on their way to heaven, can cooperate in this work.

But it also tells us, the believer will always have to contend with sin. But it also tells us that in all that we're going through, in the race that we're running, the Lord is alongside us.

So, why do we do this? Why are we encouraged to look to him? He started us on this race, and as we are running the race, he is sanctifying us, he is seeking to make us more holy.

[34 : 05] but also, we look to him, because one day, he is going to bring that race to a completion.

He is going to stop that race that you're running until the day of Jesus Christ. But the important thing to remember is this, you are preserved to the end.

you're kept to the end. And at the end, you're going to be perfect. Somebody was describing it in this way.

When the Lord puts his last finishing touch to his good work, he will never stop until that is finished or completed.

Maybe a sculptor, maybe a painter, and you think that what they have, you're seeing what they have done and you think to yourself, that's it finished, that's it complete.

[35 : 08] But he comes along maybe with a paintbrush, puts in a little more paint. Maybe it's a sculptor coming along with something else, maybe a little chisel. They're seeing something that has to be done.

And that is true for all the people of God. One day, everyone on their way to heaven will be made perfect. So we look to him, the one who completes this work, when you are made perfect.

Now you know that at this particular stage you are far from that. And when he says, until the day of Christ, that could mean the last day.

That could mean when the Lord comes to take you to be with himself. But another way to look at it is this. On that day when your race is stopped, not only are you going to be perfect, but you are going to be presented before the Father without spot or without blemish.

Somebody said, God never promises an easy time, only a safe arrival. So, what we do?

[36 : 32] We look to him. Why? There are lots of reasons. God willing tomorrow, I want us to think along the lines, what he did.

Why do we look to him? Because of what he did. whom for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.

We are looking to him, the one who did so much for us. And that's what I want us to just finish off with at this time.

You think of all that the Lord has done for you. You are so undeserving so unworthy.

You didn't deserve any blessing. But the Lord in his mercy, the Lord in his grace, the Lord in his love, he reached to where you were.

[37 : 35] He brought you to himself. He started you in this race. He's with you in the race. He's helping you as you run the race. one day he is going to bring that race to a finish.

But in the meantime, we look to him and God willing, as we sit at the table and as we see the elements that are before us, we are reminded of the body that he gave, that sacrifice that he made.

As we partake of the wine, that blood that was shed, they're just elements there but they remind us of him. And through his word and by the power of his spirit with us, we look to him.

We fix our eyes on him. And maybe today you're in this situation, I've never openly professed the Lord.

maybe when you begin to think of all that the Lord has done for you and how he has blessed you and the fact that you're on your way to heaven, surely you should come and sit at his table and partake of his supper.

[38 : 57] So I leave you with these words. We run the race with endurance or with perseverance, that race that is set before us.

Amen. Amen.