

Hebrews 12:1-17 “Running the Race of Faith”

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! Turning our eyes upon Jesus. That's why we're here. It's not just a Sunday morning thing, but it needs to be at least that to help us with every moment.

That's actually what we saw last week, that faith is. Faith, really, is seeing Jesus, right? Building our lives on realities that our eyes can't see, but are nonetheless true and eternal.

Faith, then, can't be a one-time activity. Faith, then, can't be a one-time activity. Sometimes, if you're talking to somebody that you've met about faith, we may say that we had faith with something that happened in our lives back when we were a young person and we walked an aisle or we prayed a prayer, and so we have faith.

The Bible says faith is not something that we just know about or that we just do once. Rather, it is a lifelong race.

[1 : 3 1] Hebrews 12 now turns us to a discussion of running the race of faith. So we've got our image for this morning, right? I don't have to make anything up.

We've got a race. God is here in chapter 11, helped us see what faith is, what it looks like when people trust unseen realities more than the things they see with their own eyes.

And so now, God says in chapter 12, go, run by faith. Every day, run. Let's listen to God's word together and then ask that we might be shaped by it.

We need that. Hebrews 12 at verse 1. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

[3 : 0 4] And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you're left without discipline in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled, that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

[4 : 3 9] For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. God's word.

Let's ask for his help. Father, these are wonderful things, but they're difficult things for us, not so much to hear or even to grasp, but to live.

We struggle. We need your grace. Would you so by your spirit give us grace that we might be willing, even eager, to have our lives shaped by your word more than by this world or even our own desires.

Renew us, spirit, by your word and change us even, even where it hurts, so that we'd be more and more like our gracious Savior, Jesus, we ask in his name.

Amen. In spite of how it's translated in English here, there's actually only one main verb here at the beginning of chapter 12.

[5 : 56] With endurance, let us run. Run the race set before us. All these heroes in chapter 11 lived by faith, right?

By faith, by faith. And now we are called to run our race by faith with endurance. Not, I hope this is encouraging, speed.

It's not a sprint. Endurance. It means perseverance, patience, keeping on, keeping on, bearing up under whatever's pressing down on us.

The preacher has been calling us to this all along in Hebrews. Don't drift. Cling to Jesus. Don't turn back. And now, keep running with endurance.

It is absolutely essential to life with God. Endurance. It's essential, but it's not easy. So he has to keep calling us to it over and over, lest we grow weary and faint-hearted, right?

[7 : 14] And just not have the strength to carry on. And just want to notice up front, don't you love that God recognizes that our growing weary is a distinct possibility?

He gets that. He doesn't mock us for growing weary. In fact, he has help and hope for us this morning.

Switching temporarily. Why might we be weary? Have you never run a race before?

Everybody gets weary at some point, right? It's like saying we're all so busy these days. Okay, runners get weary. Here in Hebrews, though, the weariness is a bit more pointed.

Thank you so much, Jarrett. This will help everybody. God knows that we might grow weary because we're clinging to his promises and yet we're not seeing them fulfilled yet.

[8 : 29] Remember last week the people of faith in chapter 11? Finding life in God's promises but not finding them to be coming true in my life yet.

It may be because we're being attacked for our commitment to Jesus and we seem to have nothing to show for it. Like the psalmist whose enemies kept prospering and pushing him down.

we may be weary because sometimes it is just too hard hoping in the unseen living for Jesus and I just want to satisfy myself with some of the things of this world for a while.

I want to scratch that itch. And we've parented patiently but it's not producing results. God, we're weary. I've prayed repeatedly but the chronic pain it just never seems to go away.

God, I'm weary. God, you know, to be honest I do feel like I should make some time to think about how my faith in you affects all of my life.

[9 : 44] But right now I'm just trying to put food on the table for my family and keep money in the bank and get the kids where they need to go and plan our next vacation and try not to feel too discouraged about my failures as a spouse and get prepared for the next meeting and have some real friends I can actually count on and enjoy and I'm just too weary, God, with all of the things that I see right in front of me every day.

I'm too weary to look up to anything else. I give up on trying to have life with God, a relationship, with him.

I mean, he'll be there when I die. I've got faith for them. You feel any of that? I do. I have thought or said every one of those things at some point in my journey with Jesus.

And God understands. He wants to encourage us today that the life of faith is a race to stay in, to run with endurance even when we're weary.

He knows that it's not easy, but he wants to tell us how to do that. So it's intensely practical here. Pause.

[11 : 07] The race of faith is a daily race. So he starts here by addressing how do we stay ready to run well each day.

First, he says, lay aside hindrances. Anything that would get in your way. Verse 1, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

So just imagine, before you run a race, you might need to train to shed some extra pounds, weight. You'll certainly want to empty your pockets, right? You'll take off a jacket if you're wearing it. You know, if you're really serious, you might shave your legs, right? You're really going to make sure there's nothing slowing you down in this race. You'll get rid of anything, even good things, that might slow you down.

In other words, if your goal is running the race with endurance, it's a very simple decision what to keep with you for the race. Will it help you run or not?

[12:22] Not, am I allowed to or can I get away with a little bit, but will it help me run? So, you got a few things in your pocket in life, don't you?

Meddling, mourning. How about your phone? How about your hobby? How about your habit? college football, book club, vacation, kids activities, my high paying job, my boyfriend.

Should I keep it with me? Or not? Are you willing to ask? What's the question?

I don't understand, Pastor, should I keep it with me? Of course I want to keep it with me. No, no, no, I'm asking a different question. Will it help me live by faith, run with endurance, keep my life focused on unseen realities, or obsessed with the world I see with my eyes?

[13:41] Which one? I just, I know from my own life, I think from looking at ours, if we would order our lives around honest answers to that question, they probably look different, maybe significantly different.

Not because the things that we might decide to lay aside are bad things, but will we be willing to ask if or how they help us run by faith?

Will we at least be willing to ask that question what did Jesus say in Luke 14? Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. And y'all, that's just the neutral stuff that we might need to lay aside.

we certainly must lay aside the sin that so often trips us up. Harboring sin in your heart is like running a race with a big boulder on your back, weighing you down, or with your shoes untied, you're going to trip and fall at some point.

[14:59] So what do we do? Laying sin aside is called repentance, hating it, turning from it, confessing it to God. James says even confess your sins to one another.

Fight against Satan and sin rather than just giving in to sloth or lust or slander. I talked with a brother this week who said generosity and giving is something that he loves, but he needs to do it because he says he's lifelong been fighting a battle against greed.

It's one of his besetting sins and one of the things he's learned helps him in that battle is to give generously. I love that. Lay aside every weight.

Lay aside every sin and look to Jesus. You didn't think he was going to take a week off from that, did you?

Every page of Hebrews, isn't it? Because he's greater than anything else. Look to Jesus. Robert Murray McShane must have been reading Hebrews, I think, when he famously said, for every one look at yourself and your sin, take ten looks at Jesus.

[16:22] I hope this brief look he gives us will breathe life into your weary soul this morning. Just look at Jesus for a minute. Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

The one who at the very beginning went before us as the champion, the trailblazer of our salvation. Remember that? Chapter two? He went before us and even in the beginning made our faith possible that the way up is down.

He lives that and he perfects it in the end because our faith needs a perfect object. And Jesus always comes through like ultimately when he for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising the shame sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

the deep shame of the cross. It marked the cross. Jesus considered that as insignificant compared to the joy that he saw in doing the will of his father, in achieving redemption for us, in bringing you and me with him into eternal glory with his father to have us there with him.

That joy sustained him all the way to and through the cross. That's the Jesus that we look to now and every day.

[18:07] We slow down and consider him when we're weary, when we're overwhelmed, when we're losing heart.

Because if we're hearing this sermon, we haven't given our lives yet. yet. But he did. And so there's hope that we then can suffer and yet endure.

The first Christian martyr, Stephen, when he's being stoned, what does he look up and see? He sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

And he's sustained all the way through his death. Since Stephen, many in the cloud of witnesses, martyrs, have looked to Jesus. And so we too look to the crucified Savior so that we can keep running, even and especially when it hurts.

That's what takes us into this next section. Running with endurance is often painful. Non-runners tell me something I don't know.

[19 : 20] Right? Different times, different pains for different runners. But the side stitch is going to develop. Yeah? Right? About 50 yards or so.

Is that when you get it at 50 yards? Please, somebody. Maybe it's aching feet or leg muscles. In some moments you get to this just painful exhaustion of I can't even catch a breath.

Or take another step that just hurts. Maybe it happens for you when you're cruising along and all of a sudden the slope starts to go up. You start to feel the pain.

You been there? You felt that? One of my friends that I used to run with, some would ask me a theology question right at the bottom of a really big hill. and then he would just enjoy waiting for me to try to talk and breathe running up a hill at the same time.

Didn't pick up on it for months. Bill Nash reminded us a few months ago that life itself is uphill.

[20 : 33] It's hard. That's part of what verses 5 through 11 are addressing when they talk about God's discipline. It is for discipline that you have to endure, verse 7.

The idea here, it's a little bit hard I think to understand in the ESV, the NIV states it well, endure hardship as discipline. How do we run well when we're hurting, when it's hard?

How do we not just give up and drop out of the race and just stop to make the pain go away? I know how to make it better. I could quit. He says we have to recognize that even the genuinely painful things in our lives are being worked for our good.

So we don't deny the pain, don't call bad things good, no. Verse 11, at the time, for the moment, all discipline seems painful, not pleasant.

We've got to see the hard things, the hurtful things, and name that struggle so that we can take that struggle and that hurt to God. 18th century British theologian William Law wrote, receive every inward and outward trouble, every disappointment, pain, uneasiness, temptation, darkness, and desolation with both your hands as a true opportunity and blessed occasion of dying to self and entering into a fuller fellowship with your self-denying suffering savior.

[22 : 11] You see what he's saying? Let the pain point you to the one who bore your pain, draw you closer to him, he's been there. See, we don't deny our pain, but we also don't deny our father.

He's never left us. The point of the preacher here is that painful realities in your life are actually being used by your heavenly father for your good, to help you share in his holiness.

Whoa. How would that happen? By reminding you where your hope is to be found, by producing the peaceful fruit of righteousness as you learn to trust God in spite of the circumstances.

It's why John Piper wrote, don't waste your cancer. He's saying not that it's a good thing, but that it is an opportunity because you have a good father. And so it can actually draw you deeper into relationship with him.

Don't let the pain convince you that God doesn't care or that God has forgotten you. Far from it. The painful struggles are evidences that God cares for you as a father.

[23 : 26] After all, didn't Jesus tell us that not even a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of our father in heaven and that we are of more value to him than many sparrows, even then that he has numbered the very hairs on our head.

So if something more painful than a hair for you is going on, your father knows, your father sees, your father is working for your good even through bad.

That's come into your life. There's peace then in the pain. Not peace from the circumstances here. No, what did we sing? Peace that flows from heaven.

A strength in time of need. I know my pain will not be wasted. Not a single tear. It won't be wasted. Christ completes his work in me.

Hardship is endured by seeing it as discipline from a loving father. Be encouraged. God knows you will hurt deeply as you run the race of faith but it's not arbitrary or meaningless.

[24 : 34] He's anchoring you to an eternal hope to a suffering savior. And there are going to be days when you struggle to feel that, to find that. You need to have a brother or sister who will enter in with you, who will not deny the pain.

They'll listen to you, they'll mourn with you, but they won't leave you there. They won't let you deny your father either. In fact, they'll point you to him.

They'll remind you that although you are hurting, he's helping you. And that's the heart behind the final section this morning. It's going to remind us that the race of faith is not an individual project, it's a group project.

It's like a team race where your team doesn't finish until everyone makes it across the line. The issue is not how fast is the fastest guy, that doesn't help, but how do we make sure that we don't leave anyone struggling behind?

How do we run well together? Can we think about that for just a minute? Look at verse 12. You can see the discouraged runner here, can't you?

[25 : 48] Drooping hands, just done, ready to give up, no more motivation. Weak knees, unstable, right?

Maybe even fearful of keeping on running. The lame needing to be healed on a straight path.

That may be a description of you at times, but it may be a brother or a sister in your family, family, in your church, in your grace group.

Notice how once again Hebrews broadens our focus beyond ourselves to our brothers and sisters. Strive for peace with everyone, for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

That's pretty serious. We have to be connected to Jesus to have that kind of holy life, right? So, so, see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.

[26 : 57] Notice what he says. He doesn't say make sure that you obtain the grace of God. That's not what he's calling you to. He's actually calling you to something harder than that. Be careful about everyone else.

You know, about really surface level things in their life like how's your day and how are your kids? no. Be careful about roots of bitterness.

Look for everyone else about their sexual morality, about their holiness. Wow. That doesn't leave much out.

Remember back to chapter 10 we have a responsibility to stir one another up to love and good works. This is more one anothering. Running together, arms locked, no one falls down and gets left behind in this family.

Strengthen the struggling. Are you drawn to those who are hurting? Maybe even to those who look like they're doing pretty well but they've got a distinct limp as they run, weighed down by an obsession they can't seem to shake, clung to by a sin that they can't seem to get away from?

[28 : 25] That's your job, friends. It may not be your sin, but she's your sister. It may not be your addiction, but he's your brother.

it's our issue. And God's at work. God's at work in the struggling one, in him or her.

Perhaps even he's at work using you as an agent of his discipline, as an agent of his producing holiness, so that even the one who is most feebly running receives his grace and then runs freely again.

Don't give up on them because they're limping behind. Don't run ahead without them. Pick them up. Run together. Look to Jesus. He's enough for all of us. And as you do, remember the relationship. Yes, one another, but run well together by remembering the relationship we have with God as our Father.

[29 : 37] It's a little harder to track with here, but that's the issue for Esau. What did Esau do? Esau gave away the covenant blessing that he couldn't see in the moment.

You get that? You wake up every day and see the covenant blessing, the glory of God and his faithfulness immediately when you open your eyes? No, he didn't see it. He gave that away for something that he could see.

He could taste it right in that moment, right? Just for a meal. Esau lost sight of what was valuable. I get that. It's the opposite of living by faith, of valuing the unseen, right? All he could value was what he could have right in that moment and see and touch and taste.

And it was later that he realized that that blessing, that relationship with the covenant God was so valuable. See to it that no one is unholy, neglecting the blessing of being set apart as God's

treasured possession and living as if all that matters is my comfort and my success right here, right now.

[30 : 54] So here's the deal for the relationships in your grace group. If you need to turn around and look at them to remind yourself, go ahead. Friends don't let friends miss the glory of God's grace and settle for less.

Friends don't let friends minimize the value of being loved by God and drop out of the race. Friends don't let friends live for today and neglect eternity because we're all prone to it and we all need help. Turning our eyes to Jesus. The writer of Hebrews has sent us to stir one another up. Now he's calling us to strengthen the struggling, not to let anyone fall out of the race of faith.

It's not a race where you're competing against one another to win, right? Please don't get confused. It's a race you're completing with one another to endure, to finish together.

That's the kind of race that this is. If you've ever run a race of any length, you know how much help it is not to run alone. You felt the relief from the cup of water pass to you at the right moment.

[32 : 07] The strength from the apt word of encouragement spoken by the runner next to you. Even the energy from the crowd cheering near the finish line. I want us to think about that together as we close.

This image is inspired by Pastor Joe Novenson a couple years ago. The cloud of witnesses surrounding us in this race is primarily those who've gone before us in the race.

For the sake of Mother's Day, let's call them our spiritual mothers and grandmothers. But as you picture them, the picture here is a bit different from what we often think when we read this verse. It's not so much that they're looking down and watching us and speaking to us. It's actually that we look at them and their testimony of faith is what we hear when we see them.

That Jesus is worth it. That God is faithful. That he never let me go. I suspect each of us has names and faces that come to mind immediately when we think of forefathers in the faith.

[33 : 16] Those who've gone before us. Who've showed us the path of faith and what it looks like to walk. Next week, we're going to see that endurance in the race of faith ends in a kingdom.

I can't wait to explore this with you. But here, before we get to that, endurance ends finally in an eternal embrace.

Abraham, Sarah, Moses, who endured so much. The Old Testament prophets and martyrs slain in two who yet hoped in the Lord, waited on the Lord, renewed their strength, ran with wings like eagles, not getting weary.

They're embracing us as we cross the finish line. And so right now, here's what they're doing. They're taking the good news of Jesus, that he's worth it.

the message of the gospel that Jesus saves, that the truth of the Bible, shape your life around this. They're taking this baton and they are pressing it into your hand.

[34 : 26] They're running and now they're handing it off to you and they're saying, Southwood, live by faith. Fix your eyes on Jesus and run.

Jesus himself is there in this cloud of witnesses. The one who went to the cross in spite of its shame and Stephen and the New Testament apostles and the many other martyrs who've given their lives for the cause of Christ.

Christians through the centuries have endured persecution, suffered through church schisms, endured mockery. Missionary, missionaries who've packed all of their belongings into a coffin to go invite people into the eternal embrace of Jesus that they knew that they themselves couldn't lose even if their life ended trying to invite others into it.

As we read this passage today, they're saying, live by faith. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Take the baton and run.

Perhaps more recently, we should think of Christians in Nigeria. Our brothers and sisters, some of whom even this week have ended their race that they endured by faith in martyrdom.

[35 : 47] You may think of Frank Six, of Laura Wolfson, of Ron Brady, who can't wait to embrace us again eternally to live in their embrace.

They want us to bring with us many more from this community. They're by the Spirit of God pressing the baton of the Word of God into our hands this morning and saying, Southwood family, whom we love, live by faith.

Fix your eyes on Jesus and run. Run. Run to our neighbors and to the nations toward lives of rest in a world of exhaustion, lives of simplicity in a world of chaos, toward lives of peace in a world of war

