

Looking Unto Jesus

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[0:00] We can turn back to our reading in Hebrews. We're going to look at the first two verses of chapter 12. Hebrews chapter 12.

You see there it says, Therefore, so it's in light of what we've just read in chapter 11 as well. 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. Here, the writer to the Hebrews is speaking about the Christian life in that sense of it being a race running, a race. And as we approach a communion season, as we think of the week ahead of us, we could ask ourselves, where are we in this race that we are running? What stage are we at? And how is it? How are we running in this race? Are we running with vigour and energy, fresh in this race?

Or are we running with that sense of weariness and tiredness and struggling in the race? Are we in the race? Might be a question we ask ourselves as well. Have we begun this race?

[1:37] Are we looking to engage in this race? There's so many ways that we can look at this. But the writer is encouraging us all where to look as we look to this race.

It's to look to Jesus. The summer months see a period when many races take place. There'll be the fun runs.

There'll be the 5Ks and 10Ks, and then all the way up to maybe half marathons and marathons and ultra marathons even that people will run in. And sometimes we might think, well, the summer seems so far away.

But anyone who's wanting to do one of these runs, and especially runs that are for a greater distance, you cannot just wake up one morning and say, I'm going to run a 10K.

Or wake up one morning and say, well, I'm going to go and run a marathon. You would unlikely finish because there's been no preparation made. You haven't been training.

[2:38] You haven't been out running before that. You're just thinking you can just go and do it. These kinds of races, they need preparation. And they need ongoing preparation, training, and exercise.

And the same is true when we think of the Christian race. We might think, well, I want to be a Christian, and I'm going to do it myself.

I'm going to figure out how I'm going to run this race in my own way. I'm going to make the plans for it. I'm going to see just how it is I'm going to run this race.

But it takes preparation. It takes training. It takes endurance. It takes a lot of work. And that's what the Scripture reminds us of.

And in these two verses, we have so much that reminds us of what the Christian race is like. And we're going to look at these two verses under four headings.

[3:38] And they are under a heading where we see it is a setting of being in a stadium, if you like, and running a race where there is a crowd round about us.

And the first thing we're going to see is the crowd. The second thing we're going to see is the call. The third thing we're going to see is the fear. And then the fourth thing is the focus.

So these four things, these four headings, the crowd, the call, the fear, and the focus, as we think of running the Christian race. The first thing is the crowd.

The writers wanting us to know what the Christian life is like, this great race that we are running in.

And what he is doing is writing it in light of what he said in the previous chapter as well, the example of others who have gone before us.

[4:40] And that's what I said in verse 12, it begins with a therefore, a therefore. And that's in light of all these people who are mentioned in chapter 11.

He draws our attention to that chapter where he mentions the great men and women of the faith in the Old Testament, of how their race was set before them, and of how they ran this race.

And these people who you read of in chapter 11, we see that they are now the crowd that is watching on. It says, A great cloud of witnesses.

There is the substance to the crowd that is around, the people who are around. And they are the witnesses, a great cloud of witnesses.

They have run their race. And even in the verses that we read there in chapter 11, we saw the kind of race that some of these people had.

[5:49] It wasn't straightforward. It wasn't easy. It was a difficult race. You see it throughout the last few verses there in verse 33.

There's a whole list of things that these people have gone through.

Their race was hard. Their race was difficult. But they have run the race. And how did they run the race? Well, that's what that great chapter is about.

It always begins with by faith. By faith, they ran their race. And so these are the great cloud of witnesses that we have around us.

And it's saying to us, Well, if these people could run the race, so can you. So can you. And they're there as an example to us, as an encouragement to us.

[6:53] When you read through this great chapter in Hebrews 11, it reminds us that they were ordinary men and women. Ordinary men and women who had their backgrounds, who had their problems, who had their challenges, and who yet by faith ran the race.

For example, Elijah, who is mentioned in chapter 11, is mentioned in James chapter 5, verse 17. In the New Testament, it says, Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.

He was an ordinary man. And James is writing there in chapter 5 about prayer and the power of prayer. And he's saying it wasn't because Elijah was a superhuman being.

He was a man just like us. But by faith he prayed. Through faith he prayed. And so this crowd is there for us, there around us, as this cloud of witnesses.

The ones who are, almost like you would say, looking on and there for our encouragement. The image is very much of a stadium and of a crowd gathered in the stadium.

[8:06] We runners are about to start a race and the crowd is watching on. And you imagine the crowd that's watching down on our race, on our lives.

You think of the names that are mentioned. The crowd, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, Noah, David. The list goes on and on.

It's not just the ones mentioned in Hebrews 11. Many others who have gone before us, right up to the ones we knew ourselves. Those who have gone to glory.

They are the cloud of witnesses who are watching on, as it were, on our race. They are there for our encouragement. Encouraging us, surrounding us at all points.

When you think of this crowd, you almost ask, well, what would they think of us? What would they think of you and think of me and how we are running our race tonight and in our time?

[9:08] Are we running being faithful? Are we running with that prayer of faith of Elijah? Are we running with those acts of obedience of the likes of Noah who built an ark?

Even when it seemed crazy, is this the way that we are running our race? What do they see of us? Are we doing things for the glory of God?

Are we being obedient to the Lord in all that we do? And especially as we think of coming to a communion season, are we doing this in remembrance of him? Are we being obedient to that call and to the mission of the church?

What would they make as that cloud of witnesses around us? What would they make of us? There's a challenge in that, as there always is.

But they are there for our encouragement. They might challenge us this evening to review our race, to ask, are we running as we should?

[10:13] Are we doing as we ought? They are there as those who have gone before us. Those who by faith went on in this race.

The second thing we see here is that there is a call. There is a call to us. So there is the crowd of witnesses around, but then it says, 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.

So there is a call to us. You might hear when you're going to run a race, the starter says, on your marks, you're about to go into this race.

And that's the call to us as well this evening, the call to run this race. And if you're going to run this race, you need the right approach.

And so the writer here says, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. They sound similar, these two things.

[11:27] He's talking here about the weight, every weight and sin. But as you might understand, they are two different things. He wants us to see the kind of life and preparation and training that we need to have in our lives.

So he says, first of all, lay aside the weight. Lay aside the weight. What kind of impression would this have? What understanding would they have in the theme of the race that he's talking about here?

A runner cannot run a race properly if he's overburdened by many different things. So in the days of the writer to the Hebrews, and you see it in Paul's letters so often as well, the theme of running the race is always there.

But they would make preparation. They would get ready to run the race. They wouldn't run dressed as they were. Just as you see people running races today, they wear the right shoes, the right gear, everything that's going to help them.

And so that's what he's saying to us here as well. Every weight has to go. Everything that's going to hinder you in this race has to go. And sometimes it's speaking about legitimate things.

[12:41] But if they are coming between us and our relationship with the Lord, then they have to go. You don't see someone going into a race, carrying their laptop on their back, or running with a mobile phone in their hands, or a bag of clothes.

They are going to leave all of these things behind to run the race, because it's going to hinder them. And that's what the writer is challenging us with as well.

Whatever is holding us back, whatever is more important to us than Christ, it has to go. As one person put it, we will often need the help of us, the help of Christ to enable us to let it go.

That's what we need. Because there are things that are hindering us, that are weighing us down, that have to go. But Christ is there to help. Christ is there to help.

But he also says here that the weights must go, but he also says the sin which clings so closely.

[13:53] So there's the legitimate things we could say that come between us and God, and sometimes it can be people, it can be work, it can be so many different things that we have to think, well, what's more important?

That or my relationship with the Lord Jesus. But he also says there's the sin that clings so closely. And again, these are the things that we have to examine in our lives as we approach the Lord's Supper, to examine ourselves and to ask, are there sins that are clinging so closely?

Those repeated sins in our life. Any athletes, maybe not as common now because they've clamped down on it, but many have been caught out by taking performance-enhancing drugs, thinking they could get away with it.

And when you look back, some were actually stripped of their titles afterwards because they had cheated. And there are sins in our lives that will prevent us from running this race as we ought. And so we have to take it seriously. And sometimes we can think it's, well, insignificant sins that don't matter, but sin will be set. Sin will hold us back.

[15:07] Sin will bring us down. There's a little plant called the sun june. And when you look at it, you think it's not much to look at. A slender stem, some round leaves.

But on those leaves, it's fringed with hairs and like a substance that glistens in the light. Bright drops of a liquid on these leaves. But any fly or insect that lands on this, they're stuck.

This shiny moisture on each leaf, it just sticks to the fly and the fly cannot move. And the more the fly struggles, the more then the leaves start to close in.

And eventually the fly is trapped in the leaves and the plant feeds on this fly. It's so gentle, so subtle, so insignificant, yet so deadly.

And that's the way the sin is described here, the sin that clings so closely. The sin that we get stuck into and we can't get out of.

[16:18] And there are so many sins that can cling so closely to our hearts as well. The sin of pride, the sin of lust, the sin of greed, the sin of jealousy, the sin of anger.

They can seem insignificant things in and of themselves, but they cling closely. And they are there all the time for us. And they too have to go.

Let us lay aside every weight and sin. So the weight we can get rid of by saying, well, what needs to change in my life? But what about sin? How do we rid ourselves of that sin that clings so closely?

Well, we think of what we are doing, of what we are looking to as we think of coming to a communion season. We are looking to the one who went to the cross.

And why did he go to the cross? That our sins might be forgiven. But how? By confessing.

[17:31] By confessing our sins. By taking our sins to the cross. By laying them before Jesus. As Psalm 130 says, Who can stand before God?

But yet with you, there is forgiveness. We can come before God through Jesus and confess our sins.

And seek forgiveness for all of our sins. And he is faithful. And he is just to forgive us our sins. As we come confessing. So here we have that call that comes to us to run this race, laying aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

There are certain things we maybe need to look at in our lives, whether it's to get rid of or to confess as we look to the race that we are running.

The third thing that we see here then is the fear. The fear. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

[18:52] When you enter a race or maybe before you enter a race, you may be thinking to yourself whether maybe you want to run a 5K or a 10K or a half marathon.

One of the fears that's going to come quite naturally is will I finish? What if I don't get very far? What if after maybe 2K or if I have 5K I've got a stitch and I've just got to give up?

How embarrassing that would be. There's this fear of failure. And so it is with the Christian life as well. This fear of what if?

What if I fail? What if I don't make it? What if I don't get through? Well, we are told that we can do so running the race, this race with endurance, the race that is set before us.

And there's a couple of words here that we just want to tease out a little. And the first is this, this word for race. What kind of race are we running?

[20:01] Well, if you're going to run a half marathon, if you're just the ordinary person coming to run the half marathon, it's not going to be easy.

It's going to be hard. And that's what this word is saying here as well. We are going to run this race. And this race is a struggle.

This race is a challenge. It's not going to be easy. The word used in the original language here is where we get our English word agony from.

So when you think of running, there are times when a race is agony, when there is pain, when there is suffering. And there will be that in our experience.

As we go in this Christian race, there are going to be those struggles, those pains in our life. And they are going to be ongoing.

[21:07] This is a race that we are in. That's a long race. And so over that period, there are going to be these struggles, these pains that we have to experience.

But knowing that is surely a help for us as well. Knowing that there is going to be pain. But knowing that as we go through, we will come through this pain.

And that it will be worth it in the long run to finish this race. So you have this agony, this pain that you have to go through.

This race is a struggle. But he also says here that we run with endurance the race that is set before us.

This endurance, this means that we are in it for the long haul. That there is a commitment on our side. But we also, as we're going to see in a moment, we have a commitment from the other side as well.

[22:12] That the Lord is with us. So that despite this race being a struggle, being an agony at times, and there are obstacles, there are difficulties, we are in it for the long haul.

We are in it with endurance, this race that is set before us. William Barclay, the Christian writer, he said this, it is that, I'm talking about this word endurance, it is that determination, unhesitating and unrelenting, unhurrying and yet underlying, which goes steadily on, and which refuses to be deflected.

Obstacle will not daunt it, delays will not depress it, discouragements will not take its hope away. It will halt neither for discouragement from within, nor opposition from without.

It is a steadfast endurance which will carry on until in the end, it gets there. It gets there. It's like the hymn writer says, through many dangers, toils and snares, the grace leads us on.

There is endurance. It's for the long haul, but we keep going. And you notice how in verse 1 it says, the race that is set before us.

[23:45] This seems to indicate that we all run our own race. We all have a race to run. We all have our different pains.

We all have our way of endurance. So we are running our own race. We don't look at others. One of the greatest distractions for athletes is to get distracted by those who are running beside them. Instead of looking towards the finish, they look to their left or to their right and they're thinking, that person's catching me. And all of a sudden, they lose their stride.

Well, here we're being told, we don't look to others, what they're doing, in the same way in the Christian life. We don't think, oh, that Christian is doing so much better than me. That would just bring us back.

We think I'm not good enough. I can't make it. Or we can look at others and say, oh, I'm doing much better than that person. And pride comes in and then we start to stumble in a different way.

[24:51] We run our race. The race that is set before us. But we are not in a competition. We are on the same team.

We are all running our own race. And our job isn't to outrun anybody else. Our race is to run for Jesus.

The race that he has set before us. The race that he has planned for your life and mine is what he has set before us. And we run that race for him.

We do so not trying to beat those who are beside us, but to encourage those who are with us. Just as those who have gone before us, the great cloud of witnesses, are there for our challenge, our encouragement, all of these things, so we run this race together as well.

And we run it with other brothers and sisters in the Lord to encourage them, to strengthen them. Let us run this race with endurance, the race that is set before us.

[26:12] The final thing we see here is how are we going to run? How are we going to keep going?

How can this endurance be? Well, the only way that we can run well is to keep our eyes on Jesus. He is the only one we have to run for.

And that's what you see in 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 God.

Looking unto Jesus. This is our focus. This should be our focus on a daily basis in everything that we do.

Looking unto Jesus, the founder, the perfecter of our faith. Where did our race begin?

[27:22] Did it begin by looking at ourselves? Well, if you go back to Isaiah chapter 45, verse 22, there it tells us where the Christian life begins.

Where God says there, turn to me and be saved, all ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is no other. Turn. Look to me and be saved, he cries out there.

That's where faith is focused, on him. Look to me and be saved, all ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is no other. So looking to him is where the race begins.

But it's also how the race goes on. Always looking to Jesus, the founder, the perfecter of our faith. We keep our eyes on him, on what he has done for us, on how he has gone before us.

He has finished the race for us. He is, as it says here, the founder, the perfecter, you could say the pioneer of our faith, the one who has gone before us for our faith.

[28:37] Our faith is in him, and his finished work. That's what the cross is all about. Where Jesus died on the cross for our sin, where he said, it is finished, that we might look to him.

What it says here, the founder, the perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross, despising the shame of it. He endured the cross, and he's at the right hand of God the Father.

What he suffered for you and for me, that is what we are to remember as we come to the Lord's table. This due in remembrance of him, not self-congratulating, not saying well done to ourselves, but looking to him, who went before us, who endured the cross, despising its shame.

And look at what it says though. Who for the joy that was set before him. It seems a little strange, doesn't it, to use the word joy.

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. You might think it would say something else. The shame, you might think, that was set before him.

[29:58] The agony that was set before him. The horror that was set before him. You might think it would use these words, but no, it says the joy that was set before him.

And so we have to ask, what was this joy that was set before him? Well, as someone said, it's the joy of bringing many sons to glory.

When you go back to Isaiah 53, and that great passage that describes the suffering of Jesus, it says there, along the lines of, he shall see of the travel of his soul, and he shall be satisfied.

It's almost like he looks on the people, he's on the cross, he looks on the people, and he sees in his agony, but is satisfied because he's doing it for them, for those who will believe.

And so this is the joy that was set before him, that he endured the cross, to bring many to glory. The great cloud of witnesses, that is a crowd that is ever increasing.

[31:13] As it says in the parable of the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son, that is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner, see, there is joy, there is joy in salvation.

And as we look to the cross, we see there what Jesus endured, for the joy that was set before him.

And you think of what he endured on the cross, the shame, the mocking, the beating, the abandonment, where he cried out in that agony, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

He endured the cross, for the joy that was set before him. Jesus has gone before us.

He is the pioneer of our faith. And that means that he is there to help us along the way. So that as we look to Jesus, as we set our eyes on him, looking to Jesus, what do we see?

Well, earlier in Hebrews, it's described in this way, chapter 4, verse 15, we do not have a high priest, who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect, has been tempted as we are yet without sin.

[32:41] Then it goes on to say, let us then with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

When you think of running a long distance race, one of the things that people look for as they are running, is that watering point, where you get a certain distance, and there's people there to offer a cup or a bottle of water to you.

And it's there for your strengthening, your help. Well, as we think of running our race, as we think of coming to the Lord's table, it's like coming in that remembrance of the one who endured the cross for the joy that was set before him.

And that we might find grace to help in time of need. That as we take of the Lord's supper, we find grace to help in time of need.

So we fix our eyes on him. We run this race. We see the finish that is ahead of us all, and we keep going.

[33:54] Just as he endured, but with joy that was set before him. Do you know, we have a joy to look forward to as well. that we would see him face to face.

That we would come into his glory. Paul writing of running the race, and as he concluded his race, in 2 Timothy chapter 4, said, I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. A wonderful testimony. And he's able to say, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.

The reward is there. So what is the great cloud of witnesses seeing of our race? Are we in the race? Are we running the race as we ought? Are we doing it for his glory? And are we looking to Jesus? The founder, the perfecter of our faith.

[35:08] Are we doing it for his glory? There's a hymn that says, O soul, are you weary and troubled?

No light in the darkness you see. There's light for a look at the Savior, and life more abundant and free. Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

Turn your eyes towards Jesus. That's the call to us all. Remembering the great cloud of witnesses. Remembering the call to run this race. Knowing the fear of it, but the help that we have. And knowing that in everything, we can look to Jesus.

[36:09] May he help us. Look to him. Not just for this week ahead, but every day as we run this race.

That we would look to him, the founder, the perfecter of our faith. Let us pray. Lord, our gracious God, we do thank you for your word, for the truth that it gives to us.

The reality of our lives, the race that is ours, the agony that it brings, the endurance that we need, but also for the great promise that there is Jesus there for us.

That we can turn our eyes towards Jesus. That we can look to him, the author, the founder, the perfecter of our faith.

And that we would do so in all things for his sake and for his glory. Amen. We're going to conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 18.

[37:17] Sing Psalm's version, Psalm 18, page 21 of the Psalm books. We're going to sing from verse 29 to 32.

The tune is Old 100. Psalm 18 at verse 29, With help from God I can advance against a troop and rout them all. And with the aid of my God will give, I can leap over any wall.

We'll sing from verse 29 to 32 to God's praise. with help from God I can advance I can't be poorer than he wants.

For perfect is the way of God. No choice but within his word.

To all who put their trust in him. A shield of refuge is the Lord.

[39:05] For who is one except the Lord? He is the Lord who is the Lord.

He is the Lord who is the Lord. Amen.

After the benediction I'll go to the main door.

We'll close with the benediction. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.