

Anticipate

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[0 : 0 0] Everybody, we're going to read from Hebrews chapter 12, and you will see very soon the relevance! of what Andy just shared to what we're thinking about this morning. We're looking at this very brief, short, two-week length series. You can hardly call it a series if it's two weeks, can you? And we're looking at the idea of anticipation. Last week, Andy led us in the idea of repentance, and this week in anticipation as we draw near to the final week of Easter and the run-up to Good Friday and to Easter Sunday. Chapter 12, verses 1 to 6 of Hebrews. Therefore, yeah, on the screen. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorn in its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood, and you have forgotten the word of encouragement that addresses you as sons. My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Amen. And the Lord bless to us the reading of his word.

We're going to have a look at Usain Bolt. When someone wants to succeed badly at something, they'll work really hard to achieve their goal. If you think of Usain Bolt, he is and was the most amazing of athletes. I mean, he wasn't just a 100-meter gold world champion and gold medal winner. He was also a 200-meter one as well, and he ran in the relays, and he did all kinds of just stupendous achievements as a runner. But I want you to think about how long it took him to reach the pinnacle of his success. I want you to think about how much training he had put into that, how much effort. Every day he had to think about winning the race, achieving his goals, getting across that finishing line, winning that gold medal. For the higher calling, actually, of representing his country, not just representing himself, and then celebrating as he did once he'd passed that finishing line. Every day he had to watch what he ate. Every day he had to train. Every day he had to be dedicated to his craft. He had to, every day, aim to be better than he was the day before.

That's what it takes to be the best. And he was the best, wasn't he? And he let you know he was the best as well. He had a supreme confidence, didn't he? And if you've watched him run, it's quite amazing.

I've watched him run quite a bit this week. He never got up. He never often got the fastest start. There were other people out much faster than he was. He'd get low down on those blocks, and you could see him getting ready and prepared. But because he was a tall man, it took him a while to straighten up and to get to his fully erect position so that he could then begin to lengthen his legs and sprint out.

But as you got to 30 meters, 40 meters, he then just excelled, didn't he? And he knew even before, even before he'd made it, he knew he was going to win. You could see that. And when he won, wow, the joy.

[4 : 14] Now, that image is the image I want you to keep in your mind when you think of these verses that we've read from Hebrews 12. For they tell us that we too must fix our eyes on completing a race, and we must strain with every ounce of our being and put in all of the energy and effort that we have to finish that race.

And while we're running that race, it tells us we have to keep our eyes constantly fixed on Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith. Not Usain Bolt, though he was very good.

He knew how to run races. But Jesus knows how to run the race of life. Jesus knows what it takes to win the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus knows what it is to live in eternity. And he wants us to live in eternity in the Father's house with him. And so we must strain every muscle. We must strive every day to be better than we have been the day before. We must take control of our appetites and our desires, and we must bring them under the lordship of Jesus. We must carry the cross daily to follow him. We must do that in order to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross and scorned its shame. And we have a much higher calling than a gold medal or representing our country. We have a much higher calling and a greater prize than an earthly prize. But crucially, to get there, we must fix our eyes on Jesus.

And so you've all been given a cross. You've all been given a palm cross to take home with you. Can I suggest that you don't just kind of throw it in the bin at the end of the day, or add it to your other palm crosses that go back 6,345 years, and then just begin to put them around the community. Put them on a park bench or just deposit it somewhere, not in a littering sort of way, but just somewhere nice, because it has a message. When I was a lad, I was in the boys' brigade, and we used to go marching. I never quite understood why I went marching. It was the kind of only time that we went to church, though. So we went marching, and then we'd go to the church, which I didn't particularly like, except we got a thing called an orange.

[7 : 08] Orange. Now, when in the 1960s, you didn't see many oranges. Working-class boys didn't have many oranges. So to get an orange once a year, that was a big deal. Easter felt like a bigger deal in the community than it does now. Putting out leaflets around Christmas, that's not particularly difficult. Inviting people along to Christmas, that's not particularly difficult. Easter, what a different story that is. It is a bloody story. It is a violent story. It is a story that isn't so easy on the mind and in the heart. But it is a story vital for us to tell, vital for us to share. For without Easter, Christmas has no real value. It is because of Easter. It is because Jesus died to take away the sins of the world, the Lamb of God who was slain. It is because of Easter that we have a great message to share. We have good news, ironically, on what we call Good Friday, a terribly bad day.

But a day that provided a solution to the human problem of sin, and Easter Sunday, a really glorious day, for it provides a solution to the problem of sin and death. The grave will not conquer, and death will not have the final word over those who have faith in Jesus. And in the meantime, we are called to run a race and fix our eyes on Jesus. That's our anticipation. That's the thing we are being asked to do during this Lent period, constantly anticipating the glory that is coming, and until we get over that finishing line, running the race that is set before us.

So, what did Jesus anticipate? Next slide, please. Well, you remember the Christmas carol, Hark the Herald Angels Sing. It has these lovely words, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Christmas, anticipating Easter. Now, it's interesting to think, when did Jesus become conscious of his mission? Some people suggest he was conscious of it, even as a little baby. I don't know how they would be able to kind of test that hypothesis in any sense of the word. That's a bit like saying, the little Lord Jesus no cry any made, makes, which actually can't be true, because he was a baby, and he must have cried. Yeah, so you do get some sentimental rubbish sometimes being spouted, even from the church. But he became increasingly conscious of it. The scripture says, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and with men. He learned in normal human ways. He went to the synagogue, and he would have learned the prophets, the prophecies of the Messiah. And at some point, it would have dawned on him that these were speaking of him. When he was 12 years old, he went to

Jerusalem, and he spoke to the religious leaders, and he asked them questions, increasingly becoming aware of his mission in the world. And when he was challenged by his parents for leaving them, he said, did you not know that I must be about my father's business? He was becoming increasingly aware of his mission. And then, as he entered into his ministry, and he began to speak to the disciples about his mission and his ministry, he made it clear to them that he had to go to Jerusalem. He had to die. And on the third day, he would rise again. And he quoted to them from various passages of Scripture, and he taught them that Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, and all of these great prophecies like Micah chapter 5, they all referred to him. And certainly, as he entered into this final week of his life and ministry here on earth, and he went toward the Jerusalem in order to go toward the cross, the Scripture says, he set his face like a flint. He was absolutely determined that he would carry out the mission for which his father had sent him. And did you notice, you will notice rather as you read the

[11 : 48] Gospels, that even his mother Mary, who knew from the outset that he was to be called Jesus for he would save his people from their sins, that this child would be for the salvation of the world, even she resisted the idea of his cross. She looked for another way and hoped for another way. And in Gethsemane, Jesus said, Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will. Jesus faced a very real struggle when he anticipated the cross. It wasn't easy for him to go into this last week of his ministry, knowing what was ahead of him, knowing the suffering, knowing the torment, knowing the stigma attached by the law to those who hang on a tree. Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. Knowing the horror of the suffering, so much so that the Romans would never carry it out on a Roman citizen. It was only something suitable for those who they regarded as less than human.

And the Scripture says, Jesus, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross. Notice, it doesn't say he enjoyed the cross. It doesn't say that he found the cross easy.

He endured it. Imagine having nails driven through your hands. Imagine having all of your joints pulled out as they stretch you out on the cross. Imagine the pain, the awful pain and anguish of the physical sufferings, but then the emotional sufferings, the mental suffering, and the spiritual suffering.

Imagine, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before him. He anticipated something beyond the cross that would bring him joy.

So he endured the sufferings of the cross for your sake and for my sake. He knew it was coming. At the transfiguration, you might miss this. It's often missed. At the transfiguration, when Moses and Elijah came down under the mountain to speak to Jesus, it says in Luke that they talked about his departure, which is a kind of a sanitized way of saying about his dying. That would add to the anticipation, but also to the horror that was dawning on his soul. At the triumphal entry, we read of it this morning. He came through. They were saying, Hosanna to the king of kings, Hosanna to the son of David, all of that. He was never fooled. He knew that this same crowd would turn against him as prophesied and cry, crucify, crucify. In fact, Luke tells us that at the end of that day, on Palm Sunday, he looked down on Jerusalem and he wept, oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only you had known what would make for your peace, but now it is hidden from you. And he knew what was awaiting Jerusalem in AD 70 when the

[15 : 20] Romans would eventually take Jerusalem and kill over a million people. And then you think of Gethsemane, where he dropped, where he sweated drops of blood. I don't think that's just a metaphor. I don't think that's just hyperbole. I think he literally stressed so much.

His heart was under so much pressure that his body began to seep blood because of the horror that was awaiting him. He endured the cross, and yet for the joy set before him.

So, how or why did he have this joy? Why this joy? Why, as Isaiah says, there is a slide here. You'd go through one. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Why did he do this?

Because the sovereign Lord helps me, he says. I will not be disgraced. Therefore, have I set my face like a flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. Why did he fix his eyes on the cross in this way?

Why did he endure it? Why did he have this joy set before him? Why could he not be persuaded to turn his back? Why could he not be persuaded to find another way? Well, Isaiah 53 tells us, Notice, after he has suffered, he will see. After he has died, he will see his seed, and he will see. And he will see. And who are his seed? You are. We are. Everyone covered by the precious blood of Jesus. Everyone saved and sanctified by the precious blood of Jesus.

[17 : 56] Everyone in heaven now, and everyone who will be in heaven in the future, are his seed. He died on the cross and hung there, and in his mind's eye, he saw you, and he saw me, and we were the joy that was set before him. That makes you feel special. That's why I wear a cross.

Sometimes my children will tease me and say, I do wear jewelry. I don't have any other jewelry except this. And I will object and say, this is not jewelry. Well, it is. But it's much more than that.

It is something I cling to before I go to sleep at night, as I say my prayers and commend my soul to God, for I do not know if I will wake up in the morning.

But I do know that if I do not wake up in the morning, I will go to be with Jesus, which is far better. For he saw the suffering of his soul and is satisfied. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. As he hung on the cross, he saw you, he saw me, and he is pleased.

Notice what Hebrews says, though. It doesn't just say that. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorn in its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

[19 : 38] What is the point there? The point is that he now occupies that place next to his Father, where he ever lives to intercede for his people.

And this is the other thing that brings him joy. When we're in that interim period, and we're running that race, and we're seeking to fix our eyes on Jesus, and we're tempted, because it's a hard race, to give up, he is praying for us, that our faith does not fail. Do you remember what he said to Peter?

When Peter said, I go to prison with you, I'll even die for you. Jesus said, really, Peter? Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. You're going to be in big trouble, Peter. But don't worry.

I have prayed for you that your faith does not fail you. I have run this race for 40-something years now. It's amazing. I don't know where the years went.

But I have not fallen, and I have not taken my eyes off Jesus, because he ever lives to intercede for me, because he is able to keep me from falling, and to present me before God in exceeding great joy.

[20 : 51] That's why our faith does not fail. It's got nothing to do with my resilience, my natural resilience, or my natural endurance, or my knowledge, or my determination.

It's got nothing to do with that. It is all to do with Jesus, my heavenly coach, as it were, who keeps me in the race. For he is at the right hand of God, ever living to intercede for me.

Hebrews puts it like this. He is able to save to the uttermost all who come to God through him. Why? Because he ever lives to make intercession for them.

So the next time you're tempted to think, aren't I a really good Christian? Haven't I done really well? You are what you are by the grace of God.

You are running the race because of Jesus, and because he is on your side, and he's willing you on, along with a great cloud of witnesses who've gone before, who ran the race against great odds, and got there in the end.

[22 : 00] So will you. And you might think, I ain't a great runner. I'm not Usain Bolt. I'm more like Jake the Peg. Don't worry.

Jesus has got you, and you'll get there in the end, because he ever lives to make intercession for you. The joy that was set before him.

Here I am, and the children you have given me, Hebrews says. He died so that those who fear death all of their life might go with him as part of the many sons to glory.

I can imagine getting to heaven and seeing Jesus, and thinking, I'm really pleased I got here. I don't know how I managed that. He would say, well, you didn't.

I managed. But it was never in doubt. From my point of view, it was always in doubt. From his point of view, never in doubt.

[23 : 06] He is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before him with exceeding great joy. Jesus is still anticipating, still waiting, still cheering us on.

That's good, isn't it? So the next question is, what do you anticipate? What do you anticipate? What is your goal in front of you? What do you want out of life?

You want a big house, big car, great job, nice wife, nice husband, lots of kids, all good, all good. I hope you get all your dreams, but I hope you don't entertain a dream that does not include Jesus.

Because without Jesus, none of that in the end will really count. For we have it only for this life, and then it goes to somebody else.

And so I remind you of what he said. What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul? What can a man give in exchange for his soul?

[24 : 16] I'd rather have Jesus we sang than silver and gold. We talk about longing and loving the old rugged cross. Our greatest treasure is in Jesus.

And that's why life is important. The race we run is important. Not for the things we possess, but for the quality of life and the effort we put in to our Christian walk with Jesus.

Philippians chapter 3, verses 7 to 14. Paul speaks of his anticipation of the joy of heaven that is set before us. That's one of the things we should anticipate, the joy of heaven.

Listen to what he says. Whatever was to my profit, I now consider lost for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes back from God and is by faith.

[25 : 28] I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this or I'm already made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it, but one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Do you think, having read that, that Paul was an indifferent sort of Christian? Do you think he was the sort of guy who thought, well, you know, I don't feel like running today?

Not at all. He strained every muscle, every sinew, every nerve. He put in the effort day after day after day after day for the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

He was the spiritual Usain Bolt of his day. There was no half-heartedness. He didn't want to be second. He wanted to be first.

[26 : 43] And that is a challenge to me. I hope it is a challenge to you. I love the Song of Songs. I was going to preach on this verse, but I decided against it because I didn't want to kind of read a book like that to you on Palm Sunday.

It didn't feel right somehow. But in the Song of Songs, there's a lovely moment in chapter one where this rustic country bumpkin of a girl is going to go off and see Solomon.

Solomon shouldn't have had anything to do with her because he was king and he had lots of fresh-faced girls in the harem who were beautiful and they were worthy of him. But this country bumpkin girl, she was the one he loved.

And she's coming and he hears that she's coming. And so he's kind of making his way to the farmstead where she is. And she's a bit ashamed to see him because he's turned up and she hasn't got her makeup on.

And she says, the problem is, the problem is, my brother's made me work in the vineyard. And she says, my skin, it's all sunburnt.

[27 : 49] Yeah? I am dark, she says, but lovely. Dark with the sun. And in those days, you know, suntan wasn't the thing. It was, you know, the old whitewash. She was ashamed.

She said, I've kept my brother's vineyard, but I have not kept my own vineyard. And that's a metaphor. That's how some of us should feel.

We've not been keeping our vineyard. We've not been preparing ourselves for our lovely Jesus. We've become half-hearted and indifferent in the race. We're happy to be last or second from last.

We want to get in heaven, but we'll get in by the skin of our teeth. It's not the way. It's a very dangerous attitude. The way, says Paul, is to run to win.

The way is not to trust yourself. Not to think, well, I'm going to get there, so I'm all right. Not to think, well, it's all right if I take my ease. The way to get there, he says, is to think, I haven't already got it yet, but I'm going to press on.

[29 : 01] That's exactly what Andy was led to say. And that means that's exactly what the Holy Spirit wants to say to some of us today. You have become half-hearted and indifferent in your race with Jesus.

It is time to pick yourself up and to work much harder at this race. Not to be complacent. Not to settle for second best.

Anticipate heaven as your greatest joy and then let nothing stop you getting there. Let no one stop you getting there. Let nothing tempt you to give up in the race.

Are you anticipating the joy of heaven? Is it your greatest treasure? Secondly, anticipate, next slide, because if you don't, I can't remember what I'm going to say next.

Anticipate the joy of sharing the gospel and winning others for Jesus. See, the writer of the Hebrews is saying, fix your eyes on Jesus. Think of him enduring the cross. Think of him doing this for the joy that was set before you.

[30 : 10] Think of him doing this because he knew that people were going to be in heaven because of what he did. And then, if you are going to be with Jesus, become like Jesus, and do what Jesus did.

Why don't you live your life doing the same? Think about those who will be in heaven because of you. Think about those who heard the gospel from your lips and because you preached that gospel, they are in heaven.

Think of the joy that will come when you look around and you think, I'm really pleased to see you. wow, how did that happen? And they say, it was something you said.

It was something you shared. It was, because you didn't know it, it was that palm cross you put on a seat. It was that smile you give me.

It was that acceptance you showed when everybody else despised me. Think of the joy of sharing the gospel and winning others for Jesus.

[31 : 21] That's a great thing for us to do while we're running this race, isn't it? We're not here to run the race just to sing hallelujah songs.

We're here to run the race that we might tell others that Jesus is willing to save them if they are willing to repent and believe. that is our joy.

Paul says, I have run the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is prepared for me a crown of righteousness which I shall receive on that day and not only me but for all those who've loved his appearing.

And as he ran that race and as he kept that faith, he said, I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Indeed, he went to Corinth and he says, I know people despise it and they despise me and they think it's too simple and they think it's lacking in sophistry and they think it's lacking in power.

He says, but I know it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. I've seen how it transforms people's lives. I've seen how it's transformed some of your lives and I'm so, so very thankful that God has sometimes used me to make a difference.

[32 : 48] Over the years, I've had the privilege of burying people I've baptized and baptizing people that were saved under my ministry and I couldn't be sad when they died because I know to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord and as I was with them when they were dying as I was praying for them as I was holding their hands as I was weeping for them I could say, well done now good and faithful servant.

Enter into the joy of your Lord. It is worth it all. It will be worth it all. All this running, all of this suffering, all of this pain, it will be worth it all when we see Jesus.

And so, last slide. What are you anticipating? The hope of heaven? The certainty that Jesus will carry you across that line?

Are you looking forward to meeting those that you've been able to share the gospel with and seeing they're there with you?

Are you really looking forward to seeing Jesus? It will be worth it all, the hymn writer says, when we see Jesus. Life trials will seem so small when we see Christ.

[34 : 23] One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase. So, bravely run the race till we see Christ.

May the Lord bless his word to each of our hearts. Amen. So, can the musicians come up please? I just want to lead us in a few moments of prayer.

There is nothing more important than knowing Jesus. And here really is the test of whether you have faith or not.

None of us want to die. I'd quite like to get to heaven without dying. It's kind of unlikely unless Jesus comes back, but it's possible.

I'd very much like to die without pain or suffering, but that might happen too. But the crucial thing is, I do know, and I don't want this to sound arrogant, I do know without a shadow of a doubt that when I die, I will not be dead.

[35 : 38] I do believe that Jesus is the resurrection of the life, and I do believe that because he is the resurrection of the life, because he lives, I will live also. And I also know that you can know this in your own heart, and I know that some of you do, but if you don't, or if you're at all uncertain, can I invite you now just to pray along with me?

Maybe just echo in these words in your own heart to ask the Lord Jesus to come into your life, to be your Savior, to forgive your sin and take it away by his precious blood, and to give you this hope of eternal life in heaven.

Let us stand, please. Lord Jesus, I thank you that you were so determined to go to the cross.

I thank you that you endured its suffering and its shame in order that we may be forgiven, and in order that your precious blood may cleanse us from every sin.

I thank you that you went through death and came through death victorious on that first Easter day. Thank you that you conquered sin and death and appeared alive to your disciples so that we who believe in you will never die, for you are the resurrection of life, and those who believe in you will never die.

[37 : 29] We believe that. And so, Lord, I pray that today those who do not know that in their hearts may be able to say, Jesus, you died for me.

Jesus, you rose again for me. Jesus, you have promised me that when I die, I will be able to go to be with you in heaven, which is far better.

So, can I invite you in these moments just to say in your heart, thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus, that you died for me.

Thank you, Jesus, that you died to take away all of my sin, give me faith, Jesus, today to trust you, to believe in you as my Savior and Lord, and to know that when my life is over, when I go across that finishing line, I will go to be with you in heaven, which is far better.

May the Lord bless each of us and may that be true in each of our hearts. Amen. voy voy voy voy