

Running the Race

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Date: 21 November 2021

Preacher: Gavin Hunter

- [0 : 00] It's good to be back. You have no idea how grateful I am to God for this church.
- I love this church deeply. I came to faith in this church. I was baptized in this tank. I was called into ministry in the creche room.
- I have many, many, many happy times in this church. I wouldn't be where I am today for the prayers of God's people in this church.
- I count it such a privilege to be here this morning. I really do. Can you all hear me okay? And we have a wonderful message to tell the nations that Jesus saves, don't we?
- Wonderful God. And I don't know how you've been the last 20 months since the pandemic. It's been a strange time, hasn't it? It's been strange for many of us.
- [1 : 12] And I will let you know, I'll probably cry more than once today. Not just because I'm emotional to be here. I was emotional before I came. But Claire and I, our best friend died actually just on Friday with COVID-19.
- And we're raw and we're grieving as someone that we knew and we loved. He was a true brother in Christ and he was ready to go home.
- But it doesn't mean that the rawness of grief is very real. He was the fellow pastor in Bucky. And his fellow elder also died last week too. So that's one church roster, two leaders, two elders in one week.
- So please pray for the Riverside Church in Bucky. They really need prayer today. And yeah, so I'm quite raw before I preach. I will let you know that.
- And when you know what I'm preaching on, you'll understand why it's even more raw. But can I say to you, God gave me this word before Pastor John went to be with the Lord. So although it's wonderfully encouraging, it's also I'm living it out as I preach it.
- [2 : 23] Does that make sense? So please, and you know what, to be honest, I don't really care if I cry. Because big boys do cry. And it's okay to cry in church.
- But I want to say also a big thank you to Pastor Daniel. Thank you, Daniel, for letting me preach. I really appreciate it. I count it. Every Sunday I say, God, I cannot do this.
- Literally. Unless you turn up and speak to your people. I cannot do this by myself. So I want to pray for God's help. Because I really need God's help.
- So let's pray together. Father, I just want to pray today, Lord, just that this sermon will be honoring and glorifying to you, Lord.
- Lord, this is ultimately, it's not about Gavin being back in Western Hills. This is all about Jesus Christ. And Lord, I want to pray that Jesus of Nazareth will increase and that Gavin will decrease.
- [3 : 23] I pray that people will only see Jesus and will only see Jesus alone. Because, Lord, we thank you, Lord, that when we lift high the name of Jesus, you draw men and women, boys and girls, onto yourselves.

So, Father, for those that need encouraged, I want to pray that you'll encourage them. For those that need to be rebuked and corrected, do that, Father. But for those that, even if there's anyone here that doesn't know the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to pray that you'll speak into their very hearts.

That they'll know that Jesus is alive. So, Holy Spirit, come. Anoint this word today. Change our hearts to become more like your Son, we ask.

In Jesus' name. Amen. So, if you've got a Bible, parents can turn with me to Hebrews chapter 12. I thought I was going to 1 Peter all week and then Hebrews 12 was really strong when I was praying.

So, Hebrews chapter 12. We're only going to read a couple of verses. From 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.

[4 : 43] 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.

I want to just stop there. Great passage, isn't it? An amazing passage. And may God bless the reading of his holy and inspired word.

When I was young, I always had an aspiration to do the London Marathon. Has anyone run a marathon here? Anyone at all? No.

Let me tell you about Chris and my church. Chris, I think, is what we call a nutcase. Right? That's my theological term of the day. And next year, he is running 250 kilometers in one week.

[5 : 53] And he calls it fun. I call it madness. Right? But he's, he, in instance, for me, I wanted to do the marathon. I remember watching as a young boy.

I used to love watching the boys in the costumes. I used to think, how on earth they can run 26.3 miles? Especially if they're dressed up like Mickey Mouse.

I could never understand it. But the problem was it never moved past that point of an aspiration. To really being committed to doing practice.

Even now, I say to Claire each year at the start of year, I'm going to get fit this year. I'm going to start running. I'm going to go to the gym. And never, ever materializes.

But the Christian faith is depicted as a race. A race of faith. It's not a quick sprint. It's not, dare I say, a hundred meter dash like Usain Bolt.

[6 : 58] It's a marathon. And the letter of Hebrews is written to a community. A community who were struggling. They were weary.

They were tired. They were burdened. They were tempted, dare I say, even to give up. In fact, we know because of Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 25, that some of them had neglected meeting together.

And they were getting in the habit of doing that more and more as the day of Christ was approaching. And in many ways, I see a similar power out in society today, isn't there?

In many ways, the last 20 months have been times where we've been weary. Certainly speaking to pastors. I know pastors who are weary. I know leaders who are weary.

And being a pastor, I know my congregation well enough to know for many of them. They've been weary. They've been tired. Some dare I say, have been tempted to give up.

[8 : 09] I can take you to one pastor I know in London who's literally lost 50% of his congregation to the pandemic.

Can you imagine that? 50%. Incredible. What does the Bible say about that? Well, how does the Bible say that we should respond when we feel tired, when we face times where we are weary, when we are discouraged, when we feel like we want to give up?

The Bible says, let us run the race of faith with endurance and perseverance.

Well, see, firstly, the first lesson that we've got to learn from Hebrews chapter 12 is we've got to learn from those that have gone before us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. There, the letters calling people back to Hebrews chapter 11.

[9 : 15] That great chapter of the heroes, the heroines of people who live their lives by faith. And that's what we're called to in our society.

We're called to live our lives by faith. Because without faith, it's impossible to please God. Amen? That's what the Word of God says.

It's clear. Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 6. But what I love about Hebrews chapter 11 is we have these heroes like Abraham and David and Moses.

And you're thinking, all these people are incredible, aren't they? Amazing people. But what about the unsung heroes of faith? Samson.

Oh yeah, we know he had long hair, don't we? Some of you might even be singing Delilah in your head. You know? But Jephthah. How many times have you heard a sermon on Jephthah?

[10 : 14] Pastor Daniel's preached one, I think, since he's came here. I think I remember him preaching once on Jephthah. I remember hearing that online. And I listened to it because I thought I've never heard a sermon on that.

So I better listen in. But what about the others? Look at these people. Look at what they had to suffer when they were called to look back to learn from those people.

Others were suffered mocking. Women's received often back their dead by resurrection. Others suffered mocking. They were flawed. They were chained.

They were imprisoned. They were destitute. They were afflicted. They were mistreated. Often they were scattered. Entirent.

Yet these are the people that God commends as people who live by faith. So when we go through the times where we are tempted to give up because we're tired and we're discouraged, look and remember from those who have gone before us.

[11 : 23] From those who have ran faithfully for Christ, not just at the start, but at the finish. These people have got such an amazing lesson to learn.

But what we see about these people who have gone before us, those great cloud of witnesses, here's a posh point. Do you know what the word witness means? Martyr.

That's what it literally means. These were people who were prepared to be faithful and running that race of faith even to the point of death.

You know, we often think, I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning. You can't say it because you've got your masks back. But in many ways, if we want to run that race, learning from those that have gone before us, we often see that suffering is not a surprise to the Christian.

It shouldn't surprise us. I wonder how many of you underline verses in your Bible. Anyone underline verses in their Bible? I wonder how many of you have got this one underlined.

[12 : 36] All who desire to live godly lives will be persecuted. What about Philippians chapter 1 and verse 29? For you recall, not only to live for him, but also to suffer for him.

Can I say to you, I have an increasing conviction. If we want to learn from those that have gone before us, if we think we're going to have it easier in society in the United Kingdom in the next 20 years, you're living in la-la land.

It's going to get more difficult. But we have to learn that the way of Christ is the way of the cross.

But the way of the cross is also the way of resurrection. Amen? It's glorious. It's hope-filled. Even in the face of suffering.

Can I say to you, I know as a fact, not just as a theory, that persecution for following Jesus Christ is real.

[13 : 42] Even in the United Kingdom. I've had abuse. I've had hate mail. I've had the people in the car parks in town saying, I'd love to kick your head in.

That might surprise some of you. But that is the reality. I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back. No turning back. Are you prepared to join? Run? With perseverance?

Because James chapter 1 says this, that perseverance must finish its course so that you may be complete, lacking nothing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he wrote this in The Costs of Discipleship. He says this, that the suffering is the true badge of Christian discipleship.

[14 : 48] I have a real fear, friends, and I'm going to say this openly, and you can tell me if you disagree, I don't really mind. My fear is this.

We want to know the blessing of following Christ, but we don't want the cost. If you want to know the blessing, you have to be prepared.

It'll be costly. It'll be costly. But here's my second point. Not just that we learn from those that have gone before us, that great cloud of witnesses, but in the present, we run with dedication and focus.

Look at verse 2. You know, we run with endurance to raise set before us, but we have to throw off every way, every sin that hinders and tangles us. You know what the real problem was for me in the marathon?

It wasn't the fact that I didn't just move beyond an aspiration. The problem was that I wasn't prepared to get my hands dirty and do the training program. And in many ways, actually, what hinders us from running that race of godliness is sometimes we have to throw off the things which so easily hinder us and entangle us.

[16 : 04] You know, going back to the London marathon, those people in the suits, would it be far easier to run 26.3 miles when you have your t-shirt and your shorts on or dressed up like the Mitchellman man?

Well, you know as well as I do, it would be far easier with your t-shirt and your shorts. But in the Christian faith, sometimes we have to throw off those things which so easily grab onto us.

Can I say to you as a pastor, I know my sinfulness more than the congregation. And I'm sure that Pastor Daniel could agree with that. As a pastor, you're so aware of how much you fall short.

But actually, I know that if I need to run with dedication, that race of faith, there's things that I know that I need to change in my life.

The things that hold me back from running. I wonder, do you know that God loves you just the way you are? And we'd all say amen to that, wouldn't we?

[17 : 11] But he refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to become just like Jesus. God loves you just the way you are.

Yes. But he wants to change us. He wants to transform us. He wants us to dare, I say, throw off those things which so easily entangle.

See, the problem for Christians sometimes isn't just that the things entangle us which hinder our progress from running that race of faith. Sometimes, as Christians, we sometimes need to get our eyesight checked.

Have you noticed the difference in the last 10 years? It's 10 years exactly today that was the last time that I preached in this pulpit. 10 years! I know that because of Kimmy's post on Facebook, happy anniversary.

You know? Because it was her wedding weekend. The problem comes as Christians, I'm short-sighted. So do you know what it means to be short-sighted, right?

[18 : 13] It means that you can see the things close up, but I can tell you feel it that the back there has become a wee bit blurry. You know, I can see them, I recognize them, but it's not quite as sharp as what it was.

So sometimes as a Christian, we can look so far and we can see the things which are faced between our eyes. You know the things in the distance, they get a wee bit and that disturbs our vision, it stops us running for Christ in the present.

Or sometimes we can be long-sighted as Christians where, there I say, you might be able to see the things in the distance, no problem, but you can't see the obstacles, the things which are hindering you running that race between your eyes.

See, we need to ask God, God, help us, help us to get our vision right. So how do we get our vision right, friends, if we're going to run with dedication?

Quite simple. Look to Jesus. Again, verse 2 says, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter and perfecter of our faith.

[19 : 31] Or the NIV says, let us fix our eyes on who? Jesus. Jesus. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. look full in his wonderful face and the things of earth will grow strangely in the light of his glory and his grace.

When we're tired, when we're weary, tempted to give up, we look to Jesus, the founder, the perfecter, the one who endured the cross for us.

Sounds a bit of a strange word to say, doesn't it? Who for the joy set before him endured the cross. What was the joy in the cross? The joy was that it brought us back to our heavenly father if we put our faith and trust in him.

Now, he died in our place so that we could stand forgiven. Perfectly right. amazing, isn't it?

[21 : 20] He invites us to come to look to him. But we look to him so that we don't grow weary and lose heart. We look to Jesus when he walked there.

We look at how he pointed to the father. Remember, I guess seminally, Jesus went through times where he was weary and he was tired and he was burdened. remember, Jesus wasn't just divine.

He was also human. You remember the sweatshops of blood? He was overwhelmed with anguish even to the point of death.

And he said, not my will, but your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Not my will, but your will. Or at the cross, remember, Jesus, he cried, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? But also at the cross, he cried out with a loud voice, he said, it is finished.

[22 : 31] Got a bit excited, I can't hang on, God. When we go through the times where we're tired and weary.

And maybe you're there today. I'm certainly there. I look to Jesus because I know that God who began a good work in us will carry on to completion.

Amen? The God who began a good work when we start running that race of faith for me, the first of October 2000, and I can tell you I was exactly on the seat that Cammy Doby is on, not on that seat exactly, but I was sitting in exactly that area.

And I had tears down my cheeks, and I remember even saying right at that point, I said, Jesus, I will go anywhere for you. Didn't know it would take me to England, though.

But you know what? God calls you go. I was thinking about dear Pat Renton, some of you might remember her, and Pat gave me my heartbeat for mission.

[24 : 03] 52 years she prayed for Natal, 52 years every Monday night, an amazing woman of God who served this church so faithfully.

I thought about people like Graham Brown, I thought about people like Keith Noble, do you remember Peter Cairn? I remember him to shout so that Peter could hear me.

People who helped me, people who inspired me to run that race to the end. I think about people like you who prayed for me, for my family.

You have no idea how much I miss. but I'm going to conclude with a story.

Can I have a story to conclude, is that right? And I'll try and not cry, no guarantee. Do you ever have days which you'll never forget?

[25 : 22] I can take you to my 19th birthday and I was in Vancouver with YWAM after being sent out from this church. And we decided to climb Grouse Mountain.

I don't know if anyone's climbed Grouse Mountain in Vancouver. You can get the stair lift up. The lift up. Me and my friends thought, well, we'll walk. It's not too far.

Three kilometres straight uphill. Typical 19-year-old lad, what do you do? You get your backpack ready, you get your snacks ready, don't you?

So what's that when you're 19? A bottle of Coke and a packet of mints. Perfect hydration tool. And I started off with full enthusiasm.

It was great. And I got a wee bit tired. And a wee bit weary. And I saw a sign.

[26 : 25] I thought, great. We're almost at the finish. And I wooked. You know what it said? Halfway there.

I thought, oh, no, that's a scunner. And then I carried on. Got a wee bit more energy. And I saw another sign.

Three quarters of the way there. And I remember I sat down with my friend TK and I sunk. I sat down and I sunk and I said, that's it.

Give up. Fed up. Too tired. We're turning back. I had the bottle of Coke. I had the mints.

Not a good idea. Yeah. And then it changed. Have you ever seen three-year-old boys run up hills when they're full of enthusiasm?

[27 : 26] You know what I mean? And I saw this three-year-old boy and he was running up the hill and he says, Dad! I'm ears pricked up.

It was the first Scottish accent I'd heard in months. I said, where are you from? And he says, Aberdeen. And then the Doric came out in full fall.

And I thought to myself, you know what, if this three-year-old can do it, I can certainly do it. But it wasn't that that changed me. The dad was like me.

He sat down, tired, weary, sweat off his brow. And he said, Dad, put your hand into my hand and step by step we'll get to the finish.

And then I watched as father and son held hands, hand in hand together and I watched as they got to the top of the mountain together.

[28 : 44] And they got to the top as father and son looked out over Vancouver and the mountains. And together they said, wow, we've done it.

Are you tired? are you weary? Are you tempted to give up?

And God in heaven is reaching out to you, Western Hills Baptist Church and saying, will you put your hand into my hand?

Because you know that I'm the God who began a good work in you. you'll carry it on to completion. So to a community who is struggling, this letter is such an encouragement.

Keep going. Don't give up. Keep running, learning from those that have gone before us. Keep running with dedication, but keep looking to run that race with Christ, knowing that God who began a good work in you, individually, will carry on to completion.

[30 : 07] Amen? But God who began a good work in this church will also carry on to completion. So, therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us play 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 its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

because, you know what? Our God saves. I'm going to pray.

Let's just be still before God. Father, I believe that you have spoke to people today because your word always achieves what it was meant to accomplish.

Lord, if there's brothers and sisters here today who are weary, who are tired, who may be tempted to give up, maybe some even who might be even watching online, who have just stopped meeting together, help us, our Father, to learn from those that have gone before us.

Help us, Father, to be prepared to be men and women of faith, people who be prepared not just to live for you, but also to suffer for you. Help us, our Father, to run with dedication, with focus, with clear eyesight, looking to you, Jesus, the one who began, the one who will complete the good work that you've started in us.

[32 : 21] And Lord, help each of us to put our hands into your hands, because Lord, we know for certainty that Lord, that one day we'll go to be with you if we know you and love you.

So Jesus, I want to pray that if there's anyone that doesn't know you today, that they'll come to faith and trust in you. And if people do know you, Lord, I really pray more than anything, this will have been an encouragement to them.

Jesus, we give you all the praise, all the glory, because this is all about you. Amen. So let's stand and sing, O Church Arise.

Enhanced. Enhanced. Let's pray.

Let's pray.

[34 : 16] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. And see the stars That crash beneath the speed For the popular has risen And as the star Is rolled away And Christ emerges From the grave This great George Continues till the day Every eye and heart Is singing So Spirit come We strengthen every stride Give grace for every hurdle That we may run Let's lead to win the prize Of serving good and faithful And since the Lord Will run away We tell him triumphs Of his grace We give the pause

And take him for the day When we first respond And glory I just want to say again a huge thank you to you all for Claire from Claire and I we love you all and we pray for you with a fail every Sunday and we'll keep praying for you but please keep praying for us Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy to the only God our saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory majesty dominion and authority before all time and now and forever and all God's people said Amen Thank you for coming and God bless you all verse 4 and as for this all this Freiheit does accept and guru the a and■■■ them and that include

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