

## Heb 12:1-2 Faithful Endurance in the Gospel Race

This passage must be one of the best examples in the NT of how the Christian endures in this life, which is pictured as a race. As we've seen, this is the "life of faith." This race is the race of those who have believed the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the race of those who "follow" the Lord Jesus. This is the race of those who have made the great profession. As Christians today, we are in some part of this "race." And if we do not endure to the end, we will not be saved (Matt. 24:13). This is why this text is so important for us! And our instructions could not be more clear! Therefore, we need these words this morning! We need to listen to them. We need to take them to heart. We need to put them into practice. God is so good to give us such instructions. With this in mind, I have 4 truths that will help us endure this race: 1) We are not the first to run this race, 2) We must run an efficient race, 3) We must keep running the race, and 4) We must keep our eyes on the goal.

1. We Are Not the First to Run This Race. The text tells us we are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses," those who have gone before us. These are the ones mentioned in Heb. 11, AND all the other saints, people of faith who have gone before us. It is where we get the word "*martyr*," those who bear witness to the truth, even unto death. So, I don't think they are just "watching" us (though they may be). Instead, they bear witness to the truth of the gospel. Or, as our text indicates, "*They had faith.*" And faith bears witness, saying, "*Jesus is Lord!*" These are spectators, who have also run the race. They have taken part. And they attest to the truth. The better picture is a court of law as the witnesses say, "*Yes, the gospel is true.*" They say, "*Yes, faith will carry you through all that you are called to endure or suffer in the profession of the gospel.*"

This means we are not alone! Many others have run and finished the race set before them. Heb. 11 and the rest of the Bible speaks of real people, real history, recorded for us. And as we view their lives through the Scriptures, we are encouraged. We are exhorted There is nothing quite like the consolation of a friend or a counselor who has been through the same thing as you have. And as we've seen, this great cloud of witnesses has been through EVERYTHING we can think of imagine as they looked forward to the promises of God, particularly the great promise of salvation in Christ.

2. We must run an efficient race. Look at v. 1. We are told to "*lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.*" The primary picture is a running race. I remember running cross country for two years in high school. And I did not wear hiking shoes and long sleeve shirts with a vest. I didn't put on big thick socks, or wear hats. No, I wore a light tank top with tiny little shorts and light running shoes. Why? So I could run a faster, an efficient race; nothing to hold me back. Let me give one more picture. I remember living in Kazan. And often we would have small teams come out and work with our company. I would go the airport and some of them would bring so much luggage. Shoes, two outfits for each day, curling irons, make up kits, pillows, the kitchen sink, etc. And I remember thinking, "*How long are you staying? You won't need all that. You wasted a bunch of space and some back pain.*" In the same kind of way, this is what Paul is saying about running an efficient gospel race. "*Get rid of the stuff you don't need. Get rid of those things that weigh you down. Get rid of those things that cause you to run slowly and hinder your efficiency, your ability to run the race of the gospel.*" (1 cor. 9:26)

He also says to “lay aside” the “sin that easily entangles.” I think of lone sock that sticks to my flannel shirt in the dryer. When I am folding the clothes, I must pull the sock away and lay it aside. In every case but one (Acts 7:48), this word “lay aside” in the NT refers to “putting off” or “laying aside” sin. Let me give some examples. In Eph. 4:22-24, Paul says, “**put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and . . . put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**” And again in v. 25: “**Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth.**” Col. 3:7-10: “**In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self.**” James 1:21: “**Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.**” 1 Pet. 2:1: “**So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.**”

The meaning of these two pictures in our text are clear. As we run this race of the gospel, as we strive to obey the commands of our Lord, it is our duty to get rid of weights and sins that cling to us that hinder our race. This is the race of the Christian life, the race of the Gospel. For the Hebrews, it was the old Mosaic System, all the extras beyond the one-time sacrifice of Christ. And of course, there is the ongoing struggle with sin with every believer. But, what are some specifics? What weighs us down and clings to us? What about love for the world? I’m not talking about loving people. I’m talking about loving the things of this sinful world. One of these is the love for money. Do you remember the parable of the Sower? He speaks of those who hear the word and receive it. But, but the “**cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.**” What about the love for power? Jesus often spoke to the religious leaders of his day about those who love the approval of man, those who sit at the head of tables and give prayers in front of people.

I think one of the big sins of our Christian culture is the love for entertainment. I think particularly of our young men. If there is free time, what are they doing? For hours they play video games. There is nothing with video games (in moderation). But, to sit for hours and neglect work or wife or family or study, and more particularly time in Bible reading and memorization, not to mention the ability to make disciples. The same can be said of women. What do you think? This is a weight that causes great inefficiency and can cause a person to be unfruitful in this life. Tit. 3:14 says, “**And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.**” There are many other forms of entertainment besides video games, whether it be too much time in sports, or the hours of television we may watch. On and on I can go. And do not hear me say video games or sports or watching tv is a sin. But, when we LOVE those things more than we should, they can become a weight in our lives. And if they become a weight and a sin that clings, what happens in the church? And we must remember, where the treasure is, so there will also be the heart.

At the end of the day, the biggest weight is an unbelieving heart. And if we pursue the things of this world, what will the result be? Eventually, a falling away . . . an unbelieving heart. Brothers and sisters, it is never easy to talk about our sins. But, as a pastor I must. One of the ways we can be more effective pastors is to know what are the prevailing “weights” and “sins” they weigh us

down and entangle us. And we are not immune. We must do the same if we are to be truly effective in the long term as pastors. And, I must practice what I preach. And if we see that we are not practicing, we ourselves must repent and at times, confess before you.

A few applications.

Application: The lust of the flesh is always at war with the “spirit.” This means we must always fight to obey the truths of this verse. It is not that we give one day for not fighting and then fight the rest of the week. We fight every day!

App. With each of us there are sins that “cling closely to us.” Some sins are like the sock that clings to the flannel shirt when you bring it out of the dryer. They are different for each of us. But, they are there. And as the KJV says, they “*easily beset us.*”

App. Battling sin is a community affair. It is the affair of the church. We must be concerned with the sins of our brothers and sisters. We need one another for godliness!

3. We must keep running the race. Our text says, “**Let us run with endurance the race set before us.**” The idea here is “stamina” “patience” “persistence” “strength.” Do you remember the movie *Finding Nemo*? The two fish set have a great adventure through the South Pacific as they head for Sydney Harbor in search of Nemo. And the Father fish is always wanting to play it safe and even give up. But, his friend, Dory, tells him “*Just keep swimming, keep on swimming, keep swimming.*” This is what we do in this race of the gospel. We keep swimming. We keep on keepin on. I think of John 6 when many of Jesus’ followers turn away because his sayings are difficult. And Jesus says asks the disciples, “*Will you also go away?*” And Peter answers, “*Where will we go. You have the words of eternal life.*”

The clear implication of this word “endurance” is that the race is hard. Life is short and full of troubles. So, what are some applications for us?

Application. We must trust the providence of God for what He gives us in this life. Look at the last bit of v. 2: “**set before us.**” We must always keep in mind that God is the one who marks the course, of our race.

Application. God tells us what we are to expect in this race. No, we don’t know the specifics. But, we know we live in a world filled with sin and all kinds of evils. And we know that life is full of sufferings and even persecutions as followers of Christ. There is no secret here. Do you remember all the experiences of Heb. 11? Our lot will follow the same paths.

Application. Be patient. Yes, life is short and full of troubles. But, when we are in this “short,” “troubled” life, it feels like forever. So, we must be patient. We must finish the race! There is no second place. And it helps to be patient as we keep running.

Application: The reward at the end of the race is every way worthy of all the pains, diligence, and patience in this life. 1 Cor. 2:9 says: “**But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”**”

4. We must keep our eyes on the goal. Look at v. 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 the throne of God.”** If we are to run the race of the gospel, we must keep our eyes on the goal. Now, there is a reward at the end of the race. And this is a great mystery, at least to the depths of our reward. But, at the same time, our reward is Christ Himself. In John 14:1-6 Jesus says, **“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** At the end of all the promises of God is Christ himself. We get HIM and everything else. In this way, Christ is both the goal and the reward. This means that now, as we live by faith, we keep our eyes on Christ. For apart from Him we can do nothing. We cannot enter the race. We cannot run the race. We cannot finish the race. We cannot win the race. I think of the words of Paul who says, **“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”** (Phil. 3:14).

This past week, Mark and I did some shooting with brother Caleb. And after putting us through some gun safety instruction, we began to shoot different guns. And we didn’t just aim anywhere. We shot at the target, with a bulls eye. And it is amazing what a fraction of a degree off the target can cause at the end of the trajectory of the bullet. And it was all about the aim. In the same way, we keep our eyes “fixed” on Jesus. He is not merely a target, but the bulls eye of all our efforts in this life. If we miss this, we miss everything. With the Hebrew Christians of this letter, they were moving away from the Bull’s eye of revelation. They had come to Christ, and now, apparently, some were going back to Judaism. They were leaving Christ. But the author reminds them in 1:1: **“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the hear of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high . . .”** And then he goes on in the letter to lay down exactly WHO Christ is and WHAT He has done. And throughout the letter he gives instructions as to how they should live. But the most important thing is to keep looking unto Christ. Christ is the goal of our minds. Christ is the goal of our hearts. He is our example. And He is so much more than our example. So what are some applications for us?

Application: We must pay attention to the details of doctrine, particularly of the gospel itself. I would encourage you to memorize vv. 1-2. It is one of the best summaries of the gospel, particularly the work of Christ in his humanity. Verse two says: **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.** (gospel – joy, cross, patient endurance, ascension) We must get the gospel right to begin with. Then, we must study the gospel lived out in the life of Christ. And, right living begins with right doctrine. And to “fix” the eye means that we don’t move it away from the goal. This is one reason we have a confession, a proven confession that reflects the primary doctrines of the Christian faith.

Application: There is more to getting the gospel right. To look unto Jesus is also to love him. This is where our affections come. This is the heart. You may have everything right in your doctrine, but if there is no love in the heart, you will not finish the race.

Application. When you sin, look unto Christ. This includes sins of commission and sins of omission. 1 John 1:1 says: **“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”**

Summary: If we are to endure, we must keep our eyes focused on him. He is the fulfillment of ALL God’s promises. And we must remember something very important from the context of these verses today. There is a race that is “set before us” (v. 1). With joy, Jesus has run the same race that was also “set before him” (v. 2). This is the parallel. He has gone before us. And not merely as an example. He is also the “way, the truth, the life.” He is the one who give us power. He is the one who helps in all life’s difficulties by the Spirit. If he were merely an example, where would the power be? He is our life! Therefore, if you are not a Christian, look to him. If you are a Christian (with all your doubts and fears and worries), look to him! If you will endure, it will be because your faith is in Him. Your eyes are fixed. Your heart has found its greatest love. This is faith. And He will not let you down!

What a wonderful passage for us this morning. We run this race by knowing: 1) We are not the first to run the race, we are not alone; 2) We must run an efficient race; 3) We must keep running; and 4) We must keep our eyes on the goal (Jesus).