

Hebrews 12:1-2

As we look to Jesus, let us confidently and faithfully endure the race of faith.

INTRO – Turn with me over to Hebrews 12, and let’s read it together before we begin dissecting its meaning.

Hebrews 12:1-2 – “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.”

Immediately, as we enter the scene, the author reminds us that we are not alone in our faith in God; in fact, he or she calls it “so great a cloud of witnesses”. What the author is referring to is the long list of names found in Hebrews 11, in which every name listed is called “hero of the faith”. The chapter prior to this mentions the word faith 26 times in 40 verses. There is no wonder why people call this the “hall of fame of faith”.

I don’t know about you, but I have never been a part of any kind of hall of fame in my life! And that’s saying something, because there is a hall of fame for *everything*! For real: Major League Baseball Hall of Fame, World Figure Skating Hall of Fame, Major League Eating Hall of Fame... Literally, a hall of fame for everything... And I’m not good enough to be in any of them. Except for the one that doesn’t rely on my strength! All that was necessary to enter into the same conversation as the men and women listed in chapter 11 was to join them in faith upon the righteous and effective work of Jesus Christ on the cross. By faith, we are regarded alongside the heroes of our faith as members of the great “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1

You probably know this already, but that word “witness” carries with it two distinct connotations: one is that a witness is one who sees something and merely reports what he sees. In the context of Hebrews 12:1-2, we are to be witnesses who admit to trusting in the truth of Jesus revealed in verse 2, “... 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.” We are able to provide evidence to that truth because we have seen the evidence of that event. And did I mention the second connotation of that word, “witness”? It actually means that we are “proof”. In the context of Hebrews 12:1-2, we are able to provide evidence to the saving power of Jesus’ death and resurrection, because we are the evidence! We are the proof that Jesus’ work has been accomplished!

And that’s really where we enter this passage! As witnesses, what is our call for this life? Since Jesus accomplished all that is necessary to save me, what am I to do? That’s where our big idea comes in...

THEME – AS WE LOOK TO JESUS, LET US CONFIDENTLY AND FAITHFULLY ENDURE THE RACE OF FAITH.

POINT #1 – WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOOK TO JESUS, THE FOUNDER AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH?

EXPLANATION – The order of these verses is peculiar to us, right? If we read them, it tells us what we ought to do before it ever explains *how* we are to accomplish them. It gives us the *action* before giving us the *motivation*. Verse 1 of Hebrews provides a veiled picture at our motivation by telling us that we are a member of a group of witnesses. But the author is simply harkening back to Hebrews 11, recalling the great men and women of faith who have walked before. But what motivated these men and women to walk in the way that they did?

Hebrews 12 starts off by saying, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great 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...”

And now he comes to a critical point in the text. His words are leading up to this point, finally revealing to you and me the motivation for our walk. And the motivation for our race that this author provides is simultaneously simple, comforting and exceedingly difficult. He writes that we are to run this race, laying aside our weights and sins by looking to Jesus.

Hebrews 12:2 – "... 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..."

Immediately, the author of Hebrews reminds us of our source of sustenance in this walk – *we cannot endure this race by looking within to muster up enough willpower to run*. We can't even draw enough strength from the heroes from the past, modeling their way of life in hopes of finishing the race in the same way as them. Instead, our only hope for enduring this race is found by running with this one particular posture – looking to Jesus. A.W. Pink put it this way, "Our eye... is fixed, not on many, but on One; not on the army, but the Leader; not on the servants, but the Lord. We see Jesus only, and from Him we derive our true strength, even as He is our light of life."

But why is Jesus the One who we look to along this race? Hebrews 12:2 answers this question for us, actually. In it, the author tells us that Jesus has gone before us on this race, and that He is "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."

I always love to point out the moments when God is exceedingly good to His people. In this instance, His goodness is shown to us in that He did not leave us on our own to figure this race out. He models for us the way this race should be run. In fact, the passage reminds us that if it weren't for Jesus running *before* us and *for* us, then we would have no hope or use to run this race. Because Jesus took on the shame of the cross, then despised that cross by resurrecting from the grave, and showed that it was all finished for us by sitting down at the right hand of God, we are able to follow His lead! In His love, He modeled faith for us, and as a result of His love, He has chosen to author and perfect a faith within us, His children!

How do we keep our step in line? How can we be sure that our life will cross that finish line faithfully? How can we say alongside Paul in 2 Timothy 4:6 that our lives are "being poured out as a drink offering" and that when the time of our departure as come, we can confidently say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." The only that this can be accomplished is if our eyes are fixed on nobody and nothing other than our Savior, Jesus Christ.

ILLUSTRATION – The rest of the passage tells us that our hope is the joy that is set before us, but I would contend to you that Jesus is both our source of strength during the race as well as the joy at the end of the race.

With this in mind, I am thinking of the Turkey Trot that my sisters and my wife made me run last year on Thanksgiving Day. Now, I don't know about you but I cannot think of anything I would despise more than running a 5k on the day that is supposed to be a day of thanks. I hate running, and the only thing I hate worse than running is just running aimlessly. And that's what I felt like I was doing as I prepared for this 5k. Everyday, Ashley and I would run 2-3 miles in preparation for this thing. And then one day, it dawned on me! My motivation for the run! Food! And when I fixed my mind's eye on the prize of eating two gigantic Thanksgiving meals, it made sense to me! There it was, my motivation for the run. And not only that, after I finished the race, I realized that it was also the joy of finishing.

As we woke up at 4 in the morning to drive out to Cape Coral to get ready for the race, my mind's eye was looking to the Turkey. When we lined up at the starting line waiting for the dreaded pistol to go off, my mind's eye was looking to the Stuffing. With every step that I slowly killed myself by taking during that race, my mind's eye was looking to the two servings of Pumpkin Pie. And those visions of gluttony were everything I needed to push through that race! And man oh man, when I finished, the very thing that had been my motivation throughout the race became the joy of my stomach. I reveled in that turkey, stuffing and pumpkin pie!

And in this grueling race of life, as we are confronted with the character flaws that we must constantly be putting off, or as we have to shirk aside the temptations to get sidetracked, what a blessing that God doesn't leave us alone! Instead, He tells us right here, your source of motivation and your future joy is right here – look to Jesus!

EXPLANATION – Well then, what does it mean to “look to Jesus, the FOUNDER” of my faith? In short, it means that the idea of running this race, even the means of running this race of faith is not my idea; instead, Jesus is the Author and Pioneer of this faith race.

One of the major implications for me is that I am not the author of my own story, and therefore, I am not the hero of my own story, Jesus is. He is the pioneer of my faith in that He provides me with the strength to be faithful to Him. Hebrews 13:20-21 say, “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will...” This faith is not my own, it is the gift of God in my life, and therefore, I am able to faithfully follow Him along the journey of this race.

What does it mean to “look to Jesus, the PERFECTER” of my faith? *This is the natural continuation of the story.* In the same way that the author of any good story does not merely leave the story unfinished at the end of the first few chapters, our God who authors our faith will not merely leave us to ourselves; no! In order for the story to be story, it means that the same Jesus who equips us with our faith will write the conclusion to our lives.

In the Greek dictionary, that word “perfecter” is defined like this: a person who brings something to completion without defect or blemish. What great hope, and the following verses from His work is why our hope lies secure:

Philippians 1:6 says, “And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

Deuteronomy 7:9 – “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him...”

Deuteronomy 31:6 – “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”

Psalms 57:2 – “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills His purpose for me.”

2 Timothy 2:13 – “if we are faithless, He remains faithful – for he cannot deny Himself.”

Homer Kent sums these up by writing, “God not only initiates salvation, but continues it and guarantees its consummation.”

As children of an eternally good and faithful God, we can run with confidence the race that is set before us! He will finish the faith story that He began in our lives. We need not worry about mustering up our own strength – white knuckling our way through life. All we need to do is look to Jesus, who promises to PERFECT our faith. What a good God we serve!

THEME – AS WE LOOK TO JESUS, LET US CONFIDENTLY AND FAITHFULLY ENDURE THE RACE OF FAITH.

Since we’ve established what it means to look to Jesus and how worshipping Him as the Author and Perfecter instills both faithfulness and confidence in our lives as we run this race, it’s time to look to our responses.

POINT #2 – BY LOOKING TO JESUS, THE *AUTHOR* AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH, WE CAN FAITHFULLY LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT, AND SIN WHICH CLINGS SO CLOSELY (v. 1)

EXPLANATION – Read with Hebrew 12:1 again, “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...” Since God authored a faith within us, we can now faithfully serve Him by laying aside every weight and sin that so easily entangles.

This command cuts right to the heart immediately, right? He doesn’t allow for any wiggle room in this race. He doesn’t say, “You can keep some things that you really enjoy nearby. Don’t worry about laying aside your

dependence on alcohol. Don't worry about laying aside your obsession with your bank account. No! He says that as a result of the faith Jesus authored in our lives, we have the responsibility to faithfully serve Him by laying aside all the weights and sins that entangle us!

What then, does it mean to lay something aside? It means to be done with it. No longer will that be something that we carry with us through this life. Since we now know Jesus Christ, there is no room for us to hold on to the weights and sins that the old man so enthusiastically collected. It's similar to the command that Paul gave to the Colossians in chapter 3:4. He wrote to them saying that since they were Christians now, they had the responsibility to "put to death" what was earthly in them. As God's chosen people, there was no room for double mindedness! We have one sole focus, one sole motivation alone, and that is Jesus, nothing else!

Thankfully for us, the Holy Spirit realizes how crafty a people we are. So, instead of just saying lay aside what needs to be laid aside so you can run for Jesus, He tells us that we to lay aside a two specific groups of things: "every weight, and sin".

It seems curious that we have the responsibility to lay aside "weights". What is meant by that word? When the passage tells us to lay aside every weight that entangles us, it is talking about anything that impedes our ability to run our race. We are to lay aside anything and everything that interferes or delays progress in our race. Are you weighted down by your worrisome care for your children, by your ambition for success at work, by your desire for a bigger bank account? Now, these things may not be sins in and of themselves. They may be perfectly fine things, but they are an unnecessary obstacle in our race.

Second, Hebrews 12:1 tells us to "lay aside... every sin". These are much easier for a preacher to explain! Ha! Sin causes us to place our eyes upon something or someone other than Jesus to bring us satisfaction. As a man or woman looking to Jesus in this race, we have the responsibility to test our lives, looking for the sins that cause our feet to stumble, move off track, or take our eyes off of Christ.

Colossians 3 gives us a fairly extensive list of some of the sins that tear our eyes off of Jesus. In verse 4, Paul writes, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry..." oh and I'm not done... "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth."

ILLUSTRATION – The picture that these verses evoke is one of an Olympic athlete striving to win a race. Specifically, the author is writing of a foot race. But as I was writing, I couldn't think but think of some of the craziest athletes when it comes to laying aside anything it takes to compete at a higher level – swimmers. Immediately, your mind may turn to Michael Phelps or one of the other Olympic swimmers as they take their place on the blocks. They've got a cap covering their head and skin tight body suits specially designed to decrease water resistance.

Today, swimmers are known to shave all the hair from their body, shave the hair from their head, and intentionally work certain parts of their body to give them a sleek figure. Why? These guys want to win! They want to give themselves every possible edge to compete more quickly.

As a response to Jesus' authorship of faith, we are able to faithfully lay aside the weights and sins in our own life, causing us to serve Him more wholly and sincerely.

EXPLANATION – So, what weights are hampering your speed? What weights does Jesus need to continue to shave off your life? Are you tethered to your bank account like me? Are you caught up worrying about your children at all times of the day and night? Does Jesus need shave away your entangling desire to be in a relationship? Do you need Jesus to shave your passion for your hobbies while he makes your passion for Him more pointed?

And what sins need to be shaved from your life in order that you may run with full might, not being distracted? Are you looking to sexual sins to bring you greater satisfaction than Jesus? Does Jesus need to shave away your sin of lust, your sin of arrogance, your sin of apathy at work and school? What sins must be shaved from your life, so that you can run with much more ease and direction toward Jesus and the joy that comes as a result?

POINT #3 – BY LOOKING TO JESUS, THE AUTHOR AND *PERFECTER* OF OUR FAITH, WE CAN CONFIDENTLY ENDURE THE RACE SET BEFORE US.

EXPLANATION – The dangerous call of the Christian in this life is summed up in just 12 words at the end of Hebrews 12:1, when the author writes, “... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” There is no doubt that this is a race that many have embarked upon, and have stumbled along the way, some may have veered far off track, but the great part about this passage is that it reminds us of what we discussed at the beginning – we can confidently endure the race, because we are looking to Jesus, our God who not only authored our faith, but who is faithful to perfect that faith.

Nothing can instill more confidence into me than to remind myself that my future is not ultimately held in my own hands. I don't hold the pen to write the end of my story, no matter what those feel good books and movies tell me. My future is written in stone by the God of the universe, or even better, my life is tattooed on my God himself.

Isaiah 49:15-16 – “Thus says the Lord... Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she would have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”

What an awesome starting point for this race we have to “endure”: assurance that the race will be completed by God's strength and faithfulness alone, as displayed through me.

With the understanding that the completion of the race is guaranteed, what does it mean for us to “run with endurance”? Actually, the base that Jesus is our Perfecter allows us to understand the word, “endurance” a little more fully. It means that we are to run the race with “the power to withstand hardship or stress due to the inward courage we possess”.

Here we are again forced to admit that our endurance in this race has nothing to do with us; instead, it has everything to do with the God who lives inside of us, providing us with all courage, power, and strength necessary to face the hardships life throws our way.

In Colossians 1, Paul prays for that church, and in verse 11, he writes, “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.”

And in John 14, Jesus Himself spoke of the His Holy Spirit sent as a Helper to the believers...

John 14:15-20, 25-27 – “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you... These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

ILLUSTRATION – In reality, then what does it look like to run with endurance? Think of some of the heroes of the faith written of in Hebrews 11. I've always been a little partial to the way the author of Hebrews tells the story of Moses in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11:23-27 – “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.”

Oh how I pray that we would be a people whose life races are marked by those words – “By faith... he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.” As you go from this room today, ask yourself if you are enduring this race with the power provided through God by faith or if you are toiling, struggling to white knuckle your way to freedom. Are you striving to manufacture the power to endure this life, or are you living in the freedom of the power freely given to believers through Jesus’ death and resurrection?

CONCLUSION – I think this passage lends itself to two natural applications that cause the rest of the directives to flow from them. The first is this:

APPLICATION #1 – LOOK TO JESUS

Upon this topic, Charles Spurgeon wrote, “The Greek word for “looking” is a much fuller word than we can find in the English language. It has a preposition in it which turns the look away from everything else. You are to look away from all except to Jesus. Fix not your gaze upon the cloud of witnesses. They will hinder you if they take away your eyes from Jesus. Look not on the weights and the besetting sin—these you have laid aside—look away from them. Do not even look upon the racetrack, or the competitors—but look to Jesus and so start in the race.”

Are you ready begin your race? Look to the founder and perfecter of your faith, Jesus, nothing and nobody else. For some, this may be for the first time. Look to Jesus and find that He much more valuable than anything this world has to offer. Maybe it’s just a consistent reminder for some in this room. To you I say: look to Jesus and find that He is still far more valuable than anything this world has to offer. He always will be.

APPLICATION #2 – THE AIM OF OUR RUN... THE JOY THAT IS SET BEFORE US (v. 2)

The second application that this passage lends itself to is found in these few words. I want to be the type of man who mimics Jesus’ example of faith. For Jesus, His joy was the joy of His exaltation, the joy of His glory, the joy of returning to His proper place in Heaven, this time seated.

For us, as believers, our aim should be the same. Literally, the joy that is set before us is also exaltation of Jesus, our joy is glorifying Jesus, and our joy is worshipping Him who made salvation possible by founding it within us and perfecting it for us.

So maybe I am cheating a little bit with these two applications, because they are in essence, the same. We look to Jesus so that we are able to run the race and finish the race, and our prize at the end of our run, the joy that is set before us is exalting that same Jesus forevermore!

Give the Gospel.

THEME – AS WE LOOK TO JESUS, LET US CONFIDENTLY AND FAITHFULLY ENDURE THE RACE OF FAITH.

Let’s Worship.