

Running the Race that is Set Before Us

Hebrews 12:1-4

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, May 21, 2023

We are here on the May long weekend, and I'm proud of myself that I remember that as an American. When I first moved here, I couldn't remember all the holidays, but now I do. This is Victoria Day Weekend, and a time when people take some time off for holidays and that type of thing. But here at the church, we have not really had a holiday week; we've been very busy. We've had a funeral, a wedding, a big outreach event in Abbotsford and several of us were able to go on Wednesday night to the Free Reformed Church to hear a gentleman named Marty Moore, from the Justice Center for Constitutional Freedoms talk about just events that are going on in the judicial system here in Canada.

This is a nonprofit organization that represents things like the churches that opened up during COVID. They're representing the freedom convoy, the truckers that were involved in that. They're representing other issues related to the LGBTQ movement. And I would say for those who were there for that evening, it was pretty sobering. When I walked away, I don't think I slept a wink that night just grieving over the sins and the evil that they're fighting in the courts right now. It was a lot of stories that were told. One was over a foster family that the child was being removed from their home just because they wouldn't celebrate the Easter Bunny. Another one was a gentleman in Ottawa during the trucker convoy that was in trouble in the courts because he was waving a Canadian flag on the steps of the courthouse there. Another one that really struck home I think with a lot of us, at least it did for me, was a family where the daughter I believe had autism, if I remember the story correctly, she was about 12 years old. And she enjoyed hanging out with boys her age, nothing bad, just hanging out with them. And doing things like sports; I think maybe breakdancing, that kind of silly stuff. And the teacher told her she liked doing that because she actually was a boy, and she should not tell her parents. And so the daughter did not tell her parents for some time. And the grief drove her to the point where she tried to commit suicide, the dad broke down the door of the bathroom, stopped her from doing it. And if I remember the story correctly, you guys can correct me, but I think later on, they tried to take the daughter out of her home. And they fought that in the court system and won. But the fact that they would even do that shows you our society has lost its mind.

In fact, when you read Romans One, this is a Romans One situation that's taking place before our eyes. And I think we all do need to be aware of that. We live in a nice society, but it's wicked. And in fact, when we were leaving the church on Wednesday night, a group of us were talking in the parking lot, and I think we were all just grieving over what we just heard. It was just so bleak. And I remember thinking I just wanted to crawl up in a cave and die. But in light of what we've been studying for this morning and the passage we're talking about, I want to tell you, you can't crawl up in a cave and die because you are running a race. And God, I've said this before, but I want to say it again, God has put you in this place and this time for a reason. This is not random. You're not here by accident. You're here to stand up to all that. You're here to show them a better way from all that. You're here to give light to a 12-year-old

girl who is being lied to from a teacher like that. That's why you're here. And you can't fold. You can't hide in the cave. You have to be diligent and run the race God's given you and that brings us to Hebrews chapter 12.

So if you would open your Bibles there with me this morning. Hebrews chapter 12. And I would actually like to say a word of prayer before we begin. But let me pray.

Heavenly Father, as we approach Your Word this morning, we want to do it with a sense of sobriety and earnestness, like those who are in a race. I pray that You would take what we hear today and open our ears and open our minds to the truths that are presented here. We are not the first believers to live in light of a godless society. It's happened all throughout history. And yet Lord as we look at these people that have gone before, may we draw hope and encouragement. And may we be diligent to be faithful in this time. The time is short; the days are evil. We've all got a numbered life. And we want stand before you one day and hear those words, "Well done, my good and faithful slave." Lord, would You help us to take these words and apply them. That Christ may be glorified in this church. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, our text is Hebrews 12. And let me read this to you, and we're going to say a few words about it. But Hebrews 12 says this, says,

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

We'll stop the reading there, but as you read that text, you can see what the author is talking about, it's pretty clear. He's telling you that you're in a race. And it's a hard one, isn't it? Just by reading the passage, it's not for the faint of heart. He mentions our incumbrances and entanglements in verse one. He talks about the need for endurance in verse one, two, and three, the word is mentioned in those verses. It mentions the cross and the shame Jesus experienced. Talks about hostility in the blood that He shed. Later on, it's going to describe the discipline that comes upon all of us as children of God and the scourging and the pain that we'll receive. Because the author wants you to know this race is a difficult thing. It's not easy. It's only for those who are willing to give it all for the Lord.

And if you notice, this passage starts off with the word “therefore,” which ties it into the previous chapter where it talks about the Hall of Faith, in order to show you that this is what people did in the Hall of Faith, they ran a race. And this is what the saints before did in Old Testament times, they followed Yahweh like contestants in a stadium. They weren't lazy. They weren't apathetic. They didn't just let go and let God; just prop their feet up and relax because “I believe and I'm saved; nothing matters.” They approached it with earnestness just like runners do. Runners work. Runners sweat. Runners labor. They toil, they drill, they train, they practice, they stretch, they exercise, they eat right, they work hard, get up early, all to win. It's the reason they do that. They do it all so they'll cross the finish line and get the prize. That's what all these people did in Hebrews 11. And now the author says, since they have done that, they've sat down in the bleachers in order to remind you, it's your turn now. That you need to carry on the legacy that they started. It's pretty powerful passage, isn't it. It's a wonderful way to finish when we were in Hebrews 11, for about what, four months? It's a wonderful way to finish it.

In fact, we haven't had a chance to talk about as much before, but when you read the Bible, one thing you find is that there's a lot of images it gives you for what it means to be a Christian. It's not just one word picture; there's a lot of different angles to it that it talks about. So you can get a full orbed perspective. For example, the Bible says we're soldiers. You don't serve Jesus in peacetime; you serve Him in wartime. You don't do it on a playground, you do it on a battleground where things are hard. And it says we're sheep because God is the Good Shepherd, and He leads us into green pastures and beside quiet waters and restores our soul. And it says we're a family because we're part of God's household now, and we're brothers and sisters in Christ. And it says that we're slaves of Christ because Jesus is our Master. And we're citizens of heaven, and salt and light, and temples of the living God, and aliens and strangers in this world. But now the author says we're athletes.

You're in a race and not just any race, but if you're tying it into Hebrews 11, this is like a relay race where we're one runner takes off down the track at full speed and runs a lap. And then he gives the baton to the next runner, and he takes off at full speed and runs a lap. And then he hands it to the next runner who takes off at full speed and does the same thing because the Jews have already done their lap of glory. And they played their part in this contest, and now they've placed the baton in your hands in order to take care of it and what the author's asking here is, what are you going to do with it now? Are you going to run or not? How are you going to handle this great treasure that you have? Are you going to use it and head out at full speed? Or you're going to do it halfway? I mention that because a lot of people are running this race halfway today, aren't they? They're not using this treasure at all.

I just told you about the meeting at the Justice Center this week, but when you hear about all those wicked things happening in Canada right now, it's hard not to think the church is not responsible for some of that. And here's why. Because the world indulges in those sins because we do. The church at large. They tolerate that behavior because the church has tolerated it for decades. We tell them it's fine.

God approves; He doesn't mind. What's happened? You can say it this way the nation of Canada has become full of wishy washy churches with wishy washy Christians saying wishy washy things, and they've given the world a free pass to be wishy washy. And now they're putting it in laws. But it goes back to the fact that we've let the baton drop. I mean, judgment starts at the household of God. And the question He's asking is, how are you going to respond? You can't be halfway in a race. You're either in or you're out. You can't be partially in a fight. It's all or nothing with that sort of thing. People in the middle of the road get run over. You have to pick a side and choose if you're going to live for Christ or not.

You know, in 1722, almost 300 years ago, the great theologian Jonathan Edwards was in a crossroads in his life. He was 19 years old about to pick a career path. So to help him make a decision, he wrote out a list of 70 resolutions to guide him as he went through life. And listen to what the first one said. He said, "I am resolved to do whatever I think to be most for the glory of God when I die." Why'd he say that? Because he understood he's in a race, and God's put a legacy in his hands. And he didn't want to waste it. He said, "I'm young now, but I'm not gonna be young forever. And I'm 19 now, but it won't last. One day, I'm gonna die, and I'll stand before the throne, and I want to make it count." Let me ask you friends, are you doing that today? Do you have that mindset? You need to. You're in a race, I'm in a race. This country needs you to run it. This church needs you to run it. Your family needs you to run it. Your friends do, your neighborhood does, this is serious stuff. There should be an overwhelming sense of earnestness and conviction when you study this text.

And that's what we're going to talk about this morning. If you're taking notes, we're gonna look at five practical steps for running this race. This is a very practical passage; I think you're gonna find this very helpful. But if you're taking notes, let me give you five steps for running the race.

The first one is to look at the witnesses. So the first practical step when you're running the race that is set before you in Hebrews 12 is to look at the witnesses. Which means in order to run successfully, you have to look at the people who've gone before you and learn from their example, study what they've done, be students at their feet. That's what the first few words of the passage tell us. If you look in chapter 12, verse one, it says, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us."

Now, why does the author say this? Well, I told you, there's a little funny saying that says every time you see the word, "therefore" in the Bible, you have to ask what it's there for. What does it go back to? And this goes back to the previous passage, where it talks about all those who came before in the Old Testament days. It tells us that men like Abel and Enoch and Noah have already run their race and distinguished themselves because they've shot down the track. They've reached the finish line with the, in my mind, I have an idea of the wind blowing through their hair and the sun at their face, that type of thing. And the idea is that after they did that, they sat down in the stands to be a witness for you. A mental picture I had this week was the people in the bleachers at the Chiefs games with those cowbells they shake, you know, cheering you on. It's kind of that sort of image because they're not there to

discourage you. They're not sitting down in the bleachers to judge you and serve as witnesses at your trial. Instead, they're doing it as witnesses to tell you that "I did this and you can too. I ran the race and by God's grace finished, and you can do the same." Because you need examples as you run the race, and you need heroes to follow who have gone before and paved the way. And the author says that's what you have in the Old Testament.

That's why it's so important to read the Old Testament, by the way. When you don't read the Old Testament, you know what you're doing? You're running in a race with nobody in the stands. You've got nobody to help you, so to speak. But this is a very different setting here.

In fact, you have a lot of people. The verse when it refers to "a cloud of witnesses" that gives the idea of a group that's so big, it looks like a cloud, like a mist. You guys have been in big crowds before, right? You can't tell the faces apart from each other, that's sort of the image, too many to count. And it's not just a cloud, but a great cloud or an enormous cloud. And it says they're surrounding you because they almost come from every side. No matter which way you look, you see them. You turn here, they're there; you go back, they're the same way. Which is always a blessing to an athlete. It always helps you when you run in front of a large crowd of people. And to be honest, I never had that experience because I played tennis, and nobody watches a tennis match. I mean, you know, you'll have your parents and your uncles there, that's what you have. But I've had friends that played football in college, and they said they can really testify to this. In fact, Nealon Stadium in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the state where we grew up in had a stadium that would hold over 100,000 people. It was full every weekend. And they said anytime you play in front of a crowd like that, it's an amazing experience because it's so loud you can't hear yourself think; you can't even hardly talk to the person next to you. And the crowd bolsters you up to such a degree that if you're tired, they keep you going. And if you're discouraged, they give you hope. If you're injured, they almost pick you up and set you back on your feet again, that's what this is referring to.

The Old Testament was given to provide that same sort of experience when you run the race. I think some of you probably felt that way when we went through the Hall of Faith. You felt like it was picking you up as you heard about Samson and Rahab. That's why they're there. In fact, I think Quentin refer to this verse earlier, but Romans 15:4, if you want to write it down, says, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." And what that means is that the Old Testament is a book of hope. It's not depressing. It was written to teach you the Word of God, so the Scriptures might be an encouragement to you.

Because the way it works is that if you're struggling with something like maybe patience, you can read the story of Abraham and see that he struggled with that; it wasn't easy for him waiting all those years for the child of the promise to come. But he stuck with it to show that you can do it too. And if you're struggling with something like God's grace, you can read the story of Rahab. And see that God gave

grace to the most sinful person imaginable, a prostitute in Jericho. Or if you're struggling with the ugliness of this culture and the society, read the story of Noah and see that society in his day was so bad, God destroyed everything. But he didn't quit; Noah kept running. And his story should remind you to act the same way.

You could also add to that, some of you guys been studying this passage this week, because David, you were mentioning this as well, but you could add church history to this. Because when you're looking in the stands, in a sense, you don't just see Jews out there cheering you on, you see Christians? This passage is not talking about that specifically, but it's an implication here because they came before you too. They've set a stage for you to follow as well. We've been going through a book on church history in our leadership training time, and somebody asked me why I get so fired up about that. And I said, "Because I feel like I have a connection to these men. I feel like the Lord put me on the earth as a pastor to carry on the work that they started."

This is one story we talked about. But when people like George Whitfield and John Wesley were preaching during the Great Awakening, the liberal churches in England were so offended at their gospel, and so mad that those guys called them sinners who need a Saviour that they threw them out. They locked the doors. So Whitfield and Wesley would preach outside on a tree stump and tell the gospel to thousands of poor and hungry souls. They said, "If you guys don't listen to it, I will tell it to them." And I don't know about you but when I hear a story like that, something stirs up inside me and I want to find a tree stump and preach. I can't help it. That's why God gave you testimonies like that. So it'll set a fire under your feet. You see those lives of those men, you see how quickly they ran the race or how diligently they ran, and it tells you, "I gotta run fast. I gotta pick up the pace here." What am I gonna say to George Whitfield when I meet him in heaven? I'll be ashamed of myself if I don't do more.

This brings you to another practical step for running the race that is set before us in Hebrews 12. That is to look to yourself. So first, you need to look to the Old Testament. Be encouraged by these men and women. But second, you need to look to yourself, which means that in order to run this race, you need to look to your own life and make some changes so you can run faster, and go further down the track. And as you read on in the passage, you can see there are several changes the author encourages you to make. There's two to be exact.

The first one is to lay aside every encumbrance. So verse one says, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance." Because that's what the witnesses should cause you to do, they should make you throw off everything that hinders you in the race. The word 'encumbrance' here it's a Greek word that means burden or weight. Some translations render it, weight. That's what runners do in a race, they shed weight, and they do everything they can to take the pounds off, so they can run faster. This word was often used in the Greek and Roman days to describe a person's clothing because the Romans and the Greeks took the race so seriously, that they would take off their clothing to make sure that nothing got in the way, not your shirt or your robes in

that day. They wouldn't even wear shoes, most of them. Anything that hindered your speed had to go because the race was a life-or-death matter to them; winning meant everything. And the way the author puts this is kind of almost funny, because you read it, one pastor was saying, you get the image in your mind of a man walking up to the start of a race, with a three piece suit on and an overcoat, and a briefcase in one hand loaded down with office supplies and a bag of gold and the other. And the question he's asking is, "What do you think of a man like that? Is he serious about the race? No. Is he trying to win? No, if he was he get rid of those things." It's the same way in the spiritual realm. You can't approach Christ loaded down with stuff. You can't serve God and money for you either hate the one and love the other; or be devoted to the one and despise the other. Something's got to give.

And I need to add, the encumbrance here, they're not sinful things. These are neutral things. We'll get into sin in a moment. But this is just neutral stuff. People have wondered throughout the years as you read this verse, what's he talking about here? And how many things should I lay aside? Well, how fast do you want to run? That's how many things you want to lay aside. How badly do you want to win? Because he doesn't give you a list. The issue is whether something distracts you from Christ and pulls you away from Him. If it does, that's what has to go because it's not worth it. That's convicting.

Do you ever feel like you own too much stuff? I read some statistics to you a while back. I want to read them again because it really highlights this, but it said that the average home in America has 300,000 items in it. You guys remember that? And the average size of the American home has nearly tripled over the last 50 years, and it's still not big enough to put our stuff in. Which is why one out of every Americans rents offsite storage to put more things in. Three percent of the world's children live in America, but they own 40% of the toys consumed globally. The average American woman owns 30 outfits, one for every day of the month; in 1930, the number was nine. And you can pick on Americans all you want, but friends I have to tell you, when you look at Canada, it's not much better. I mean, just think about how much money people spend on houses here. It boggles the mind. And do you know what's going to happen to that home one day? It's going to end up in the trash. I mean somebody's going to tear it down and build another one. And some of those things, what he's saying, some of those things consume our lives as Christians. We spend every waking moment paying the house off. You can't approach a race like that; it can slow you down. Again, there's nothing wrong with buying a house, there's nothing wrong having things, but the things can't own you, right? That's the problem. You can own possessions; the possessions can't own your heart.

Another change that we have to make in this verse, as you run the race as mentioned here is that you need to lay aside the sin, which so easily entangles us. And that's a stronger thing here because your stuff is neutral. You can take it or leave it either way, but you can't have sin in your life. So this is more serious. And the way the passage is worded, it mentions *the* sin. "and *the* sin which so easily entangles us." In other words, he's not referring to any sin, but *the* sin or a particular one that causes you to stumble. A secret idol in your heart. Whatever it is, again, there's no list here. He's not giving you a bunch of things, but it could be anything: pride, lust, greed, materialism, anger, jealousy, rage, lies,

deceit, hypocrisy, legalism, self-righteousness, a bitter and callous spirit that refuses to forgive anyone, an anxious and fearful heart that won't trust the Lord. The idea is, whatever you're wrestling with, you've got to throw it aside so it doesn't entangle you, like a runner's shoelaces would do in a race.

We all know what it's like. Listen, let's just be honest, we all know what it's like to be running the race for the Lord until an angry thought comes into our head. And what does it do? It trips us up like our shoelaces, right? Makes you just go tumbling. And we've all had the experience of chasing after Christ and going to church and loving God and serving Him faithfully, until a lie pops into our thoughts and then it causes us to go flat on our face. What's the solution to that? You have to lay it aside. That's what it says here. Don't think about it. Don't ask the Lord, "Lord, what do you want to me to do with this sin in my life." You know what to do with the sin in your life, kill it. Destroy it, the Puritans used to say, "Mortify it."

And this is why the author tells you to do that, verse two says, "so you can run with endurance the race that is set before us." That's the theme of the whole passage. This is what it's about. The reason you're laying aside every encumbrance and putting aside your sin is so you can run. And not just run but run with endurance. And not just start the race but keep going until you finish. This race is not a sprint; it's a marathon. And you don't win by being the fastest necessarily; you win by being the most resilient. You gotta be at the end when the dust settles.

The word "run" is in the present tense here, which means it's a continual thing,. Every moment of every day you have to be running. And every second of every week, you got to be going hard after God. You got to be doing it this year and next year. You have to be running in your 20s , 30s, 40s, and 50s. You have to run when you're married and when you're single. You have to run when you have kids and when you don't. You have to run when you work and when you're retired; rich or poor, sick or healthy, strong or weak, good times or bad times, like we talked about last week, in the mountain tops and the valleys. You're always running the race. It's a race to the death. It's a fight to the finish.

The reason this is such a big deal is because if you remember this context, this is what the people did in the Old Testament, they ran under the worst circumstances imaginable. There were things on their racetrack that you and I living in 2023 in Canada cannot fathom. Now, as we just talked about, the culture is going in a bad direction, but this stuff was really bad. If you look in Hebrews 11:35, let me just start in verse 32. It says,

what more shall I say,

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms,

these are the good things

performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection;

Which makes you want to sit in the stands and just say “Rah, rah” right, and shake the cowbell. But look what goes on to say.

and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

And all these, having gained approval through their faith

I don't have to tell you that when you read that that is a miserable list. It really makes your skin crawl if you understand that people actually went through that stuff. And it's one thing to be a believer when life is going well. But it's another thing to do it like this. And it's one thing to follow God when the racetrack is clear and there's no obstacles on it. It's another thing to do it when you're being tortured and stoned and sawn in two. That's what they did. And when it happened, they kept running. And when the pain came on them, they endured. They didn't complain and whine. They didn't say, “Lord, this is not fair. Why are You doing this to me; I didn't sign up for this. I'm going to quit.” They said, “Your will be done. If this is what You want in my life, I will submit to that.” Because this is what the real thing does. It lasts. It doesn't fade. Once saved, always saved; once in the race, always in the race. Jesus loses none of His own.

Now I have to confess if I start getting emotional, but this is a personal thing for me, because I was saved when I was 17. And I'm 42 now, which means that I've spent most of my life running the race, many of you can identify with that. And I can't tell you how many people I've seen drop out of it. I grew up in a youth group of about 60 kids. We had so much religion in my hometown, I can't even fathom it. We have the Baptist Church here on Church Street, if you can, it was really called Church Street honestly, Baptist Church, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, Episcopalian Church, synagogue around the corner, and then the Lutheran church down the street. Sixty kids in my youth group. To my knowledge, by the last time I lost touch with everybody, I only knew of about three of them that were walking with the Lord. And the rest of them just gave up. Or they're going to a church where they're not converted. They said to the Lord, “This is hard. I didn't sign up for this. Why are you making me suffer? I thought the Christian life would be easy now.” And when they found out it was and they threw their hands up in the air said, “I quit. It's not worth it.” And that kind of thing frightens me because I don't

want to end up like that. I don't want you to end up like that. And the truth is that the way you avoid that is you got to take this to heart.

Going back to what he's saying, you have to lay aside the encumbrances. It's okay to own a bunch of stuff, but you can't let that stuff take over. If you find your stuff doing that, well, do some rearranging. Downsize, take a pay cut if you have to, and then move into a smaller place, but it's not worth it. You have to avoid the entanglements as well. It's been said that one way to keep from getting burned is to stay away from the fire. And if your computer is a temptation for you, get rid of it. Stay off the internet; turn off the television. But you're doing that so you can endure. That's the point. When you're on your deathbed you want to be walking with Christ; running with Christ.

It brings you to another step for running the race that's set before us, and that is to look to Jesus. So you look at the witnesses, you look at yourself and make these changes, but after you do that, you need to take your thoughts higher and look to Christ, the One who won the race on your behalf. It's what verse two refers to when it says to be fixing your eyes on Jesus.

The word "fixing" here, it's a Greek word that means to look away from something to something else. You go from this, to that; east to west, because you can't look at Jesus, if you're looking at the encumbrances and the sin which so easily entangles. So get your eyes off that; put them on Him. When you're an athlete, it's very crucial where you put your eyes. And every athlete will tell you, the more that you're competing, the more you play mind games with yourself, and it's all about your focus. Same way in the Christian life, and he's telling you to focus on the Lord.

And if you're wondering, "How do I do that?" Well, the author says in verse two, "fixing our eyes on Jesus" says "the author of our faith." Which means He's the starter and creator of it. He's the source and foundation. It all goes back to Him. You were dead without Him. You were blind without Christ. You were enslaved and lost without Him. You couldn't even tell where the race was.

There are so many people, they talked about the Jordan Peterson, the outreach they were doing, there were so many people in that crowd, that they got so much energy, so much passion, and it goes nowhere; they don't know where to go with it. You were like that until Jesus came into your life and turned it around.

He also says you should keep your eyes on Jesus because He's the perfecter. He calls Him the author and perfecter of our faith, which is another way of saying that everyone who begins the race, He perfects them. And everyone who starts this journey with the Lord, finishes. If someone doesn't finish it shows you they were really never in the race at all, were they? Jesus holds on to every runner. He makes sure that every person stays in the right lane and doesn't quit, and finishes. Which means if you're still in the race today, it's because of Christ. Amen? Can you all say amen to that? I'm gonna start the sermon all over again if you don't say amen to that. If you're still trying to win, it's on account of His name. What

did you do? Nothing. What have you contributed to your salvation? Not a thing. You sinned. That's what you did. Jesus did it all, to the point that our salvation is in Christ and from Christ. It's to Him and by Him and through Him.

And that leads you to another way to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus is to remember He endured the cross. Which means Jesus had a race to run as well. The Father sent Him on a mission that led Him straight to Calvary. He didn't have a reward waiting at the finish line; He did after that, but not immediately. And there wasn't a prize there. He had a crown of thorns. But what pulled him through it was He looked beyond that in order to see the joy that was set before Him.

You see the word "joy" in this verse. It says, "Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." And the word "joy" here, it describes the motivation Jesus had for running. Because the race was hard for Him; it was not an easy journey. But the thing that got Him through was the joy of His future resurrection, and the joy of His ascension, and the joy of His sitting down at the right hand of God. The idea here is that as He looked at all that, it made the burden of His suffering seem less significant. To the point the verse even says that He despised it.

One commentator said about this, that for the joy set before Him, Jesus looked at the shame, and said, "I despise you. Do your worst. You can't stop me from my mission. Kill me, bloody me, beat me, curse me, hurt me, abuse me. I have a reward coming behind that. One day soon the Father will vindicate me, and that's what keeps me focused."

This verse shows you that when you fix your eyes on Jesus, in a sense, you're running a finished race. That make sense? Or it said another way, when you fix your eyes on Him, you're chasing after a prize that's already been won. That's what keeps you going. You're not fighting a losing battle; you're not running a defeated race. You're running one where someone has been victorious on your behalf. The passage is worded in such a way that you could look at this race as having two lanes: your lane and Jesus' lane. It has two paths going toward the finish line: your path and His path. And in order to find strength to carry on, you have to train your mind to glance at His path and draw hope in that. Your path is not always very hopeful. Your race is pretty discouraging at times, not His. We all know what it's like to be running hard after Christ until something comes along and trips us up. But the way to get over that is to think about Christ and remember that's what He died for. It doesn't honour God to sin and stop running. It doesn't please Him to fail and quit because you give up hope and it's all so bad. It honours Him when you repent of that, give it to the cross, trust in the Gospel, and then move on, keep going. At the cross, Jesus said, we talked about this last week, He said, "It's finished." Which means that Jesus did everything that was necessary to save you and keep you in the race; He left nothing out of it.

And brings it to another part practical step for running this race in Hebrews 12. And that is to look at Jesus again. I mention that because this is something the author is going to repeat here. It's like he can't

get enough of Christ at this point in the chapter. He keeps bringing Him up because as he thinks about the race, the author knows it's difficult. It's a painful thing to be in, so he keeps going back to your only source of help and that's the Saviour.

And he mentions Him in a different way in the next verse because verse three tells you to consider Him, see the word there. What does that mean? Earlier he told you to fix your eyes on Jesus. Now he tells you to consider Him. What's the difference? Well, the difference is a matter of intensity because when the author tells you to consider Jesus that means to look at him in a more studious manner. Don't just glare at Him thoughtlessly; don't just do it in a haphazard way; really put some effort into this.

The word for consider is *analogizomai* in Greek from which we get the word algorithm; it refers to a detailed mathematical equation that takes a long time to understand, takes hours and hours and hours of careful study to get to the bottom of it. Because what the author is saying is when you come to Christ, you need to approach Him like that, like an accountant or CPA would do with your taxes. We've all seen how hard accountants work during tax season and how they shut themselves off in their office and get down to their desk and hover over their calculator hour after hour after hour until they get everything perfectly right. In a similar way, the passage says you should approach Christ like that.

You can't have vague thoughts about Him, that's not going to help you in the race. You can't have warm, fuzzy notions that don't really mean anything. I remember I was at a conference years ago, I won't tell you what conference it was. And there was a t-shirt that said, "Jesus is my co-pilot." What does that mean? I went to seminary; I mean I studied, what are you talking about? You think your level with Him? I'd tell you what happens if you fly the plane; it goes straight down, right? That's shallow, you've got to go deeper than that.

Don't look at Him just as a sweet little baby in a manger. You have to be familiar with His deity, humanity, and incarnation. You have to think carefully about His Trinity, Godhead, and the hypostatic union. You have to study His mission, ministry, His death, resurrection, ascension, His high priestly work like we've been talking about in the book of Hebrews. The passage even says here that you need to consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself. Which tells you that you need to think about the fact that at every step of His journey, people stood against Him. I mean, Herod tried to kill Him as a baby, remember that? He was just born and Herod issued an order to murder all the male babies, children in Bethlehem, that were two years old or younger, just to get at Him. I would say that's hostile, would you? It's brutal. Then when He began His ministry, the devil tempted Him and tried to get Him to sin. Then when He continued His ministry, He went into the synagogue in Nazareth, read the prophecy of Isaiah, and said, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing," and what did they do? They started a revival in the town, right? No, they tried to take Him to a cliff and throw Him off of it. That was how His hometown responded to Him. Then all the religious people in the community hounded Him all throughout His days, to the point that they paid one of His closest disciples to betray Him. And Judas did that. And then when they captured Him, He went through six trials in one night,

three before the Jews, three before the Romans. And then when they put Him before the crowd, they said, "Crucify Him." And what did Jesus do? He kept running. How did He respond? He kept going toward the cross. He didn't compromise. He didn't stop. He endured the whole thing, so that when He said, "It's finished," those were the words of a champion. And when He called out to God, "Lord, into Your hands, I commit My spirit." Those were the words of a victor telling you He had overcome every obstacle to win the prize. And the principle here is you need to consider that as you go through the Christian life.

Verse three says, "so you will not grow weary," which literally translates into the phrase, "so that you will not grow sick with exhaustion." Because that's what running does to you. If you don't believe me, go out of the church building this morning and run home. It can make you so tired, you get ill with fatigue and your body shuts down, and they have to hook up an IV to get to get extra fluids. Runners go through that sometimes. The author says, "This is what Jesus is for you." Now He is the strength to get through that.

The phrase "lose heart," so that you will not grow weary and lose heart, that it refers to the act of being so discouraged that you can't even find your heart anymore. You don't know where you put it, you left it somewhere back there on the track. You start to panic and hyperventilate; a trial comes into your life and you go, "whew, whew" [mimicking hyperventilating]. A catastrophe occurs and you can't breathe. The passage says if you trust in Jesus, you don't have to do that either because He's overcome the power of sin and death, to remind you that you can do it as well. It's encouraging. It's such a blessing to read this.

And it all comes down to one more practical step for this race here, and this one is important because it puts these other ones in perspective. Let me review a little bit here. So far, we've seen that the Christian life is a race. It's not a walk. When you trust it in Christ, you did not sign up for a jog in the park; you signed up for the most difficult thing imaginable. So in order to help you with that the author says, the way to run is to look at the witnesses, or those who have come before you because you're running in front of a crowd full of friends. And then look to yourself to free your life from any burdens. And then look to Christ to remember what He's done. And then look to Him again, so you don't grow weary, which is all encouraging. If you read from verses one through three, this is positive stuff. I hope you found comfort in it because that's the reason it was given to you.

But I want you to notice when you come to verse four, the tone changes a little bit. He's still trying to help you but it's, it's done in more of a blunt manner. And let me just say that a fifth practical step for running the race is to look to the fact that you have not shed blood yet. I'd say that's pretty blunt, wouldn't you? That's a little more edgy. But look to the fact that you have not shed blood yet, which means that before you're too down in the mouth and talk about how hard the journey has been so far, remember this: it has not cost you your life. You've not died as you've run this race the way Christ did. So you got to suck it up. You have to keep running for that reason as well. Stop being so fearful.

If you look in verses three through four, let me just read the context. He says,

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin.

Now, when you read verse four, it's almost so subtle, you can miss what he's saying here. But it's a very powerful thing. When it says, "shedding blood," that's a reference to death or the death of the sacrifices under the Old Covenant system. Hebrews 9:22, if you just want to write that verse down, it says, "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins." Which refers to the fact that without the death of a sacrifice, we would die and go to hell because our sin would not be paid for. And this is what Jesus did. This is why He went to the cross, to be that sacrifice for us. And now the author uses this expression to say no matter how hard your struggles are in this life, you need to think about this. They're nothing in comparison to Christ's. No matter how many sacrifices you've made to run this race, they don't hold a candle to His. I mean, if you think about it, they're not about to nail you to cross right now. And whatever you're going through, I'm not trying to belittle it, but it's a fact. You're not about to bear the sins of the world, and be rejected by the Father, and sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane and pray, "Lord, take this cup from me." I know a lot of people talk about sweating blood right now. I've heard that expression anyway, and they say, "Lord, please take this cup from me." But you've never had a cup like this. Nobody has.

I heard one pastor say that when you think about Calvary, you've never had a bad day. You've never had a "poor me" moment. You may think so, but you haven't. I mean, what's the hardest thing we have to do for God today. Go to church, really? Witness to someone and be rejected, that's all? So the author wants to know, again, this is after the encouragement, he wants to know, what's the problem? He said, "I've said this to you the nice way. I've done it with the kid gloves on. Now, let me take the gloves off and tell you. 'Stop being a baby. Stop whining. Stop saying it's so difficult, because when you do that, it makes you wonder where's the blood? I don't see any. Where's the skin lying on the track? It's not there. Tell me how many bones have you broken in the race? How many times have you been knocked down? You've got to try harder.'"

I'm glad it didn't start out with that, aren't you? This is coming at the end of the positive stuff. In fact, when you read the verse in its entirety, it says this, it says, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin." And the idea of "strive" there, it actually sort of changes the metaphor a little bit from a race to a battlefield where there's one army against another army and they're striving to win. They're doing this, fighting, going to war. And the passage says, "You have not done that yet to the point of shedding blood." Yes, you've wrestled. Yes, you fought. Yes, you've battled

with sin. And I commend you for that. That's a good thing. But you haven't gone far enough. You haven't fought like a warrior to the point of death. Now's the time to do that.

By the time you get to this point in the passage, it's almost as if the author is coming up to you at mile marker 20, or mile marker 21 of the marathon, and he's slapping you on the back and saying, "Come on, let's get going. Stop messing around". It's like he's riding up to you on one of those bikes you see at those races. And when you're taking the final corner and you're going around the last lap, and he's giving you a punch on the shoulders, and he's telling you to toughen up cowboy. Get the legs moving. Pump the arms; kick the feet. You're in a race. This is not a picnic. You're in a battle. This is not a game. You're gonna fall from time to time. There are moments when you'll slip, and you'll skin your knees, and break a few bones. This is war; that happens in war. It's a battle; people get shot at in a battle, but you can't quit. It's just not an option. No matter how much it hurts, you can't stop following Christ. That's not what soldiers do. You get knocked over; pick yourself up and get back in the fray.

In my studies this week, I came across a story of a man named Hiroo Onoda. And I've got to share this with you because I think it illustrates what he's saying here. He was a soldier who fought in the jungles of the Philippines for the Japanese army during World War Two. But the reason he's so significant is because when the war was over, he didn't believe it. And so he went on fighting in the Philippine jungle, get this, for 29 years. He would fight against the people around him in the little villages, using jungle tactics that he had learned, almost three decades. There was a traveler from Japan going through that region and he came across him, and he asked him, "What are you doing?" And he said, "I can't quit until I'm officially relieved of my duty from the government." Which the government heard about, and they finally gave him an order, and then he went home.

But friends, I tell you that story because I want to remind you of something, you need to hear this, you are not relieved of your duty yet. The Lord hasn't sent you home. You don't have permission to lay down your weapons. You don't have His approval to hang up your guns. You don't have consent to get off the track and lay down on the sidelines and rest; you're commanded to stay in the race and run. You're told to stay on the field and fight. If you can't do that, it's a sin. It's a direct act of disobedience.

I mentioned to you at the start of the sermon how several of us went to the Reformed Church this week and heard the testimony from that Justice Center and all the terrible things that are happening. But when you hear about terrible things in the world today, you have to keep running. I mean, the list was just agonizing that they talked about. But when they drag you to court, and they put you in jail, and they freeze your bank accounts, and threaten to take your kids away, and make you pay thousands of dollars in fees and hours upon hours upon hours of work to get through it, you have to persevere.

In fact, next week, we're going to study the rest of this passage. When it goes on to say this, it says,

You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
Nor faint when you are reproved by Him;
For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,
And He scourges every son whom He receives.”

And what that means, and this is just a little preview for next week. What that means is that when trials come into your life, you need to realize that this is why it happens. God is scourging you. And when the government does those terrible things, you have to remember this is why it occurs, to provide discipline for your soul. Because the Lord is coming alongside you like a good coach or a trainer would do. And He's building you up so you can run faster. That's the whole reason.

Someone asked me the other day, he said, “Pastor Jeremy, how do you get ready for the persecution that's going to come one day?” It's a big question. And I said, I think I said, if I had that question again, I would say this, I can't remember what I said, this is what I would say, that person is in the room. This is what I'd tell you. “You need to learn how to handle the persecution now.” That's how. If you can't handle this much trouble, you can't handle that much. And if you can't walk with men or run with men, you can't fly with the horses; you can't go faster. So you have to learn how to embrace the times you're in now. We've all got to toughen up a little bit, don't we? I think we would say the church in Canada needs to get stronger. We're too soft. We're too wishy washy. It doesn't take much to bowl us over. Something needs to change, and we're going to talk about that next week when we're together. So please come back and join us for that. We'll talk about the discipline of the Lord.

For now let's close in a word of prayer and ask for God's help to put these things into practice; and live out the word that we've heard.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the testimony of the scriptures this morning. I think all of us are convicted, at least I know I am when I read about the saints of old, what they've done, and I put myself in this world today and I think I've done nothing. Lord, may these things cause us to work harder for Christ, not to save ourselves, our salvation is all of Christ; not to earn our way to Heaven, that way has been earned by the One who died on our behalf. Our salvation is all of grace. It's 100% of mercy, but that mercy should drive us to work for His glory for Your name. Lord, I pray that this would remind us of the race we're in; that we may take our lives seriously for eternity. We're all one step closer to eternity now than we were when we woke up this morning. And when we wake up tomorrow we'll be one step closer then. That needs to light a fire under us, Lord, I pray that it would do that.

And as we come to the Lord's table, this is where we remember the One who endured such hostility on our behalf. Father, thank You for Christ. Thank You that every time we fail, we can get up get up knowing that our lives are in His care. He loses none of his own. Lord, may You be glorified as we wind up this service for Your namesake. All the glory goes to You. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.