

The Christians Race

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[0 : 00] Well friends, would you return with me please to the words we read in Hebrews chapter 12, Hebrews chapter 12, and reading again verses 1 to 3.

We read 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 and serace that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted. The film Charity of Sapphire tells the story of two Olympic runners, Eric Little and Harold Abrams.

Eric's ambition as he runs is that he would glorify God, and you see that in a conversation that he has with his sister Jenny where he speaks about running and feeling the pleasure of God as he runs.

Meanwhile, Harold runs with the desire for self-glory that praise, applaud, see applause of men. At one point in the film, Eric is addressing a crowd following a race that he's just won, and he tells him that while they might have come to see a race, he wants him to participate in another race.

[1 : 33] He goes on, and he tells him about the race of faith. Well, the theme of today's sermon is very simple. We're thinking about the Christian race, and we're looking at these three verses under two headings.

We're going to look at the exhortation and then the encouragement. The exhortation and the encouragement. First, the exhortation. Look at verse one.

Here the outlaw there exhorts his readers to run the Christian race, an exhortation to run the Christian race. Now, before proceeding, we can note the context.

The letter to the Hebrews is actually a sermon that was written to professing Christians who come from a Jewish background. It's been written to urge them not to apostasize, not to fall away from the faith, not to renounce Jesus despite the pressure and persecution that they were facing and experiencing.

In Hebrews 11, we find the author presenting his readers with a hall of fame. We might call it a hall of faith. He draws their attention to a variety of men and women from Old Testament history, and the common thread, the common theme that links and unites each of them is their faith, their assurance of things hoped for, their conviction of things not seen.

[2 : 57] We move from the context to the crowd at the beginning of verse one. The author speaks about himself and his readers being surrounded by a great cloud or crowd of witnesses.

At one level, he's claiming that these men and women of faith are witnesses in the sense that they function as an example. Their lives are an example of what a life of faith looks like.

Their lives bear witness and they testify to the author and to his readers of what is expected of them. But at another level, the author is claiming that these men and women of faith are witnesses in the sense that they function as spectators.

It's as if they've gathered together to watch the author and his readers living their lives of faith. They have lived the life of faith. And now they take an active interest in others, men and women, who are also living the life of faith.

We move from the crowd to the command in the second half of verse one. The author tells his readers now what they are to do. He sees the Christian life. He sees the life of faith as being a race to be run.

[4 : 10] And he describes it as being a race that has been set before himself and his readers. They don't get to choose the race track. The race track has been mapped out for them.

It's been marked out for them. And he describes it as being a race that demands endurance. It's not a sprint that requires just a quick burst of energy.

And that's it. It's a marathon. It's a cross country that requires stamina, requires perseverance, requires dogged determination.

And having described the race, the author commands and exhorts himself and his readers to run this race. The author carries on and tells his readers how they're to do this.

He tells them that they are to lay aside or strip off certain things. In the ancient world, you remember that ancient runners would often run naked.

[5 : 06] They would lay aside. They would strip off their clothing. They would strip off anything so that they would run well. And now the author says that he and his readers must lay aside.

They must strip off certain things. And he starts by telling them to lay aside every weight. These aren't necessarily bad things.

They might even be good things. It might be a hobby. It might be a friendship. It might be an ambition. It might be a relationship. But it's become a weight that is hindering and hampering them from running.

And so the author instructs himself and instructs his readers to lay aside, strip off these weights. He goes on and tells him to lay aside the sin which clings so closely.

That's more serious. The author doesn't define what particular sin he has in mind. He leaves that open for his readers to think about. Instead, he simply describes sin as being something that ensnares and entangles, so something that clings closely, something that prohibits and prevents a person from running.

[6 : 19] And the author instructs himself and instructs his readers to lay aside, strip off such sins. Now friends, as we consider this verse, we can see the mandate of the Christian life.

The mandate of the Christian life. That's what we see here in Hebrews 12. The author is describing the Christian life to his readers, and as he does so, he describes it as being a race that requires endurance, requires perseverance, requires dogged determination.

And he exhorts them and he exhorts himself to run this race. And that's worth our attention today. The Christian life hasn't changed since the days when this letter was first written.

It's a race that requires endurance, requires perseverance, requires dogged determination, and it's a race that's to be run.

It's a race that demands participation. So let me ask you the question today, friend. Are you running this race? Perhaps you're here today and you haven't started running this race.

[7 : 32] And this passage is exhorting you to start running. Or perhaps you're here today and you started running this race, but you've slackened off.

You've slowed down. You've come to a standstill. And this passage is exhorting you to start running again.

Or perhaps you're here today and you're simply running this race. And this passage is exhorting you to simply keep on going.

So let me ask the question again, friend. Are you running this race? I'm not asking are your friends running the race? I'm not asking are your family running the race?

I'm not asking do you intend to start running the race next week, next month, next year, next decade? I'm asking you the question, are you running the race today?

[8 : 28] And as we consider this verse, we can also see not just the mandate of the Christian life, but the manner of the Christian life. That's so easy here in Hebrews 12.

The author is calling on his readers to run this race. And as he does so, he instructs them to lay aside the weights that could hinder and amper them from running and the sins that could prohibit and prevent them from running.

And that's worth our attention this morning. There are some things in life that can hinder and amper us from running the Christian race.

They're not necessarily bad things. They might even be good things. But the reality is that they can end up weighing us down, holding us back from running well.

And the things that might be weighing you down might be very different to the things that weigh me down. My brother refuses to have a smartphone.

[9 : 27] And it's not because he's a technophobe. David actually understands technology far better than I do. But David is convinced that having a smartphone will not be of any benefit to him.

It will rather hinder and hold him back from running his Christian race. And I'm sure some of you know that as well. But you can spend maybe hours on social media, hours on the BBC Sport website.

I mean I spent two hours yesterday checking how Rangers were doing on the BBC Sports website and tearing my head out when Green and Martin scored that opening goal.

But you can spend hour upon hour upon hour on all these things on your smartphone and you've got very little time for Jesus. So let me ask the question, is there some weight in your life that you need to lay aside to help you run?

But there are other things in life that can prohibit and prevent a person from running the Christian race. These are the sins that ensnare and entangle.

[10 : 33] The sins that cling closely to a person. And it might be something very subtle, very secret, something that nobody knows anything about.

But it can put a person in very real danger of not finishing their race. C.S. Lewis understood this and illustrated it in the story in his book *The Great Divorce*.

And in the book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes a young man who is tormented by a red lizard that sits on his shoulder. And the lizard mocks him.

For C.S. Lewis, the lizard represents the indwelling sin that every person struggles with. And the young man finds himself eventually at the gates of heaven where an angel is offering to kill the lizard.

And the young man's reluctant and he says to the angel, maybe you don't need to kill it. Maybe you don't need to get rid of the lizard entirely. Maybe we can just kill the lizard another time.

[11 : 33] And the angel makes it very clear to him that there is no entrance into heaven if he continues to have that red lizard on his shoulder.

So let me ask the question friend, is there some sin that you need to lay aside? What you need to put to death to enable you to run?

So there's the exhortation that contains the mandate of the Christian life and the manner of the Christian life. And then second we have the encouragement, verses 2 and 3, where the author now provides to his readers with an encouragement for running the Christian race, an encouragement for running the Christian race.

Verse 2, the author tells his readers what they ought to be doing. And he begins by telling them that they must be looking to Jesus, beginning in verse 2. In any race, the runner must keep their eyes on the prize, the finish line, the goal.

And here we find the author telling his readers that he and them must have their eyes on the prize, must have their eyes on the finish line, must have their eyes on the goal.

[12 : 50] Their attention, he says, is to be riveted on Jesus. Jesus is the goal, Jesus is the prize, Jesus is the finish line.

They must turn away from everything else, from everyone else, and must set their gaze on Jesus. And the author continues by telling his readers three things about this Jesus.

Look again at verse 2. He reminds them about who Jesus is. He's the founder and perfecter of their faith. This is a broad term that declares Jesus to be the great example of faith.

Not only that, it declares Jesus to be the great object of faith. Not only that, it declares Jesus to be the great originator of faith. Not only that, it declares Jesus to be the great sustainer of faith.

In other words, faith begins and continues with Jesus. Jesus is the A to Z, not the A, B and C of faith.

[13 : 53] He then reminds his readers about what Jesus has done. He endured the cross and despised it's shame. Throughout the ancient world crucifixion was regarded as being a shameful death.

A death reserve for the lowest of the low, the slaves, people with no rights, for a Jew contained the additional stigma that a crucified person was viewed as being under the very curse of God.

And now the author says that Jesus endured the cross and despised it's shame. And the reason he could do so, the author says, was for the joy that was set before him.

The joy of seeing his father's name being exalted. The joy of seeing his people being emancipated. The joy of seeing his own enthronement for the joy set before him, he endured the cross and

despised it's shame.

And then the author reminds his readers about where Jesus is. He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The seating of Jesus at God's right hand is a prominent theme in the book of Hebrews.

[15 : 05] It's repeated again and again and again. It points to the fact that Jesus is in the place of supreme honour, supreme power, supreme authority.

It points to the fact that Jesus is in the place where there are eternal pleasures, where there are eternal joys. It points to the fact that Jesus is in the place where he can make constant and effective intercession for his people as their great high priest.

This is where Jesus is. This is where Jesus is, who these professing Christians are to fix their eyes on. That Jesus who is the founder and the perfecter of their faith.

That Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross and despised it's shame. That Jesus who is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And having told his readers what they ought to be doing, the author tells them why they ought to be doing this. Look at verse 3. He starts by telling them now to consider Jesus.

[16 : 11] He's just told them that they are to look to Jesus, now tells them that they are to consider Jesus. That word considered is significant.

It's a word that was used of a jeweler who would carefully examine, who would consider a diamond to discern its value. He would hold it up. He would know every facet of it.

He would know every figure of it. We might say obsess over it. And the author is saying here that he and his readers are to consider Jesus in the same way.

Obsess over Jesus. Rivet their attention on Jesus. Don't get distracted from Jesus. And the Jesus in there to consider is the Jesus who endured such hostility from sinners, he says.

And having told them to consider Jesus, the author says that doing this will ensure that they do not grow weary or faint-hearted. End of verse 3.

[17 : 16] The author is aware that his readers might grow weary as they run the Christian race. And not only that, he's aware that they may grow faint-hearted as they run the Christian race.

And such weariness, such faint-heartedness is a serious matter since it could result in these professing Christians opting out of the Christian race.

Falling away from the Christian race. Not completing the Christian race. Apostosizing from Jesus.

And therefore the only remedy against such weariness, the only remedy against such faint-heartedness as far as the author is concerned is by looking to Jesus.

Considering Jesus. Not how others are getting on. Not even how they themselves are getting on. But focusing on Jesus. Still as we consider these verses, we can see the fatigue of the Christian life.

[18 : 26] The fatigue of the Christian life. That's what we see in Hebrews 12. The author is writing here to professing Christians. And he's spoken to them about running this race that requires perseverance, requires endurance, requires stamina, requires dogged determination.

And now he shows an awareness that they may grow weary. They may grow faint-hearted as they run this race. The author knows that it's more than possible that its readers might become fatigued in the Christian life.

And that's worth our attention this morning. The Christian life. The Christian race isn't easy. It's sometimes being said that it's harder for a person to keep on running this race than it was for them to start running this race.

Richard Phillips tells a story about a young woman to illustrate this point. She was being belittled by a work colleague who was saying that Christianity is just an escape route.

An escape from the difficulties of life. An easy road to be chosen only by the weak. An escape the woman replied. You try and live as a Christian.

[19 : 40] You try to wage war against the desires of the flesh. You try to live as an alien in a strange land. And then you come and tell me that Christianity is really the easy way.

And perhaps that applies to someone who's here today. Perhaps you're sitting here and you're struggling in the Christian race.

Perhaps you're sitting here and you're feeling disheartened. Disillusioned as a Christian. Perhaps you're sitting in this building today and you're thinking I just don't know if I can keep on going.

And this passage serves as God's timely reminder to you that other Christians have felt exactly the same way that you might be feeling. You are not the first person and you certainly won't be the last person to find the Christian life, the Christian race to be a struggle.

So my friend, if you are feeling fatigued in the Christian life, if you are feeling tired in the Christian life, if the prospect of stopping running the Christian race seems quite positive to you, this passage is for you.

[21 : 04] Whereas we consider these verses, we don't just see the fatigue of the Christian life, we see the focus of the Christian life. That's what we see here in Hebrews 12. The author is writing to professing Christians who are prone to weakness, prone to faint heartedness when it comes to running the Christian race, and the author is telling them, as he tells himself, to look to Jesus.

Consider Jesus. He tells them, as he tells himself, to look to Jesus, consider Jesus so they won't give up running the Christian race when they find it to be difficult.

He tells them, as he tells himself, to keep the focus on Jesus. This is the vital ingredient to the Christian life. This is the key ingredient to the Christian life.

This is the secret, we might say, to the Christian life, considering Jesus, focusing on Jesus. And that's worth our attention this morning.

The 17th century pastor and theologian John Owen has a book entitled The Glory of Christ. And in the book he writes, a constant view of the glory of Christ will revive our souls and cause our spiritual lives to flourish and thrive.

[22 : 39] The more we behold the glory of Christ by faith now, the more spiritual and the more heavenly will be the state of our souls. The reason why the spiritual life in our souls decays in withers is because we fill our minds full of other things.

But when the mind is filled with thoughts of Christ and His glory, these things will be expelled. This is how our spiritual life is revived.

Our simple friends, the Christian life is renewed, replenished, revived, revitalized by looking to Jesus, considering Jesus.

That Jesus is the founder and perfect of His people's faith. That Jesus who endured the cross and despised the shame for the joy that was set before Him. That Jesus who has been seated and will always be seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

That Jesus who experienced and endured hostility from sinners. My friend, if you are here today and you are a Christian, here is a word for you.

[23 : 52] Sometimes as we go through the Christian life, we can find ourselves getting distracted, diverted by so many things. We find our attention being drawn away from Jesus and drawn to something or someone else.

And this can happen even when we are involved, even when we are immersed in Christian work, Christian ministry, Christian service.

Today friends, we are being encouraged to keep the main thing, the main thing. Keep looking to Jesus.

Keep the focus on Jesus so that we don't grow weary, so that we won't lose heart. Friend, if we lose sight of Jesus, we will find ourselves in trouble.

If you lose sight of Jesus as a congregation, you will find yourselves in trouble. If you lose sight of Jesus as a deacons court, you will find yourselves in trouble.

[25 : 02] If you lose sight of Jesus as a church session, you will find yourselves in trouble. Keep the main thing.

The main thing. But there is also a word for you if you are here today and you are not yet a Christian. And my encouragement to you friend is very simple.

But it might prove to be life changing for you. My exhortation to you, my encouragement to you is look to Jesus.

Consider Jesus. Many of you I am sure will be familiar with the story of Charles Spurgeon's conversion. But I will share it with you in case there is anyone here who isn't.

He had gone to church in a blizzard as a 15 year old. And a poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor or something of that sort went up to the pulpit to preach.

[25 : 57] And Spurgeon says this. He was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say.

The text was looking to me and being saved all the ends of the earth. He began thus, my dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says look.

After some time he looked at me under the gallery and I daresay with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. He then said young man you look very miserable. Well I did.

But I had not been accustomed to have remarks made on my personal appearance from the pulpit before. However it was a good blow struck. He continued. And you will always be miserable.

Miserable in life and miserable in death if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now this moment you will be saved. When he shouted as only a primitive Methodist can, young man look to Jesus Christ.

[27 : 02] Spurgeon says there and then the cloud was gone. The darkness had rolled away. And that moment I saw the sun and I could have risen that moment and sun with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ.

My friend if you came here today not calling yourself a Christian for whatever reason I want to urge you and plead with you to leave this building looking to Jesus.

Don't look at Thomas. Don't look at the Kirk Session. Don't look at the Deacons Court.

Don't look at any member of this congregation because I hate to say this and I don't want to offend anyone. They will disappoint you in the end.

Look to Jesus. Look to the founder and perfecter of his people's faith. Look to the one who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and despised it's shame.

[28 : 15] Look to the one who is seated and will always be seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Friend, look to Jesus.

The Christian life begins, continues, ends with Jesus.