

## Looking Unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2    October 4, 2009)



If you turn on the Christian Channel on cable TV – you will find a view of the Christian life that paints a picture like this. You come to Christ and where you once were a tugboat – you now become a luxury cruise liner – and wait there's more – going on before us is Jesus as an icebreaker.

As the trials of life block our path – financial troubles, health troubles, relationship troubles – Jesus just pulverises those obstacles – so we can continue on our way – untouched by the tribulations of this world.

Hillsong's Brian Houston wrote a book titled – *You Need More Money* – that describes this view of the Christian life.

The title says all you need to know about the book, but in it, he makes these statements:

If you and I can change our thinking and develop a healthy attitude towards money, I believe we can all walk in the blessing and prosperity that God intends for us. (p. 3).

And if you are struggling with your health, know that it is the will of God to see you whole and healthy. Health is one of the promises of God for our lives. (p. 31).

The problem is that this is not the Christian life presented in Scripture. Nowhere are we promised a life without trial and sacrifice.

I probably don't need to tell you that *You Need More Money* is **not** a Christian classic. In fact it went straight out of print.

Contrast that with another book – a book that **is** a classic – the second most widely printed and read book after the Bible.

That book is *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

Because everyone who reads it finds reality in it. This life is tough – not because God is not powerful or doesn't love us – but because He does love us. He uses the trials to perfect our faith and make us more like Jesus.

We have to overcome trials like:

- Battle with Apollyon
- Journey through the Valley of Death
- Despair at the martyrdom of Faithful
- Temptations of Vanity Fair
- Captured by Giant Despair
- Meetings with false Christians, Formality, Hypocrisy, Discontent, Shame, Ignorance, Little Faith, Deceiver, Atheist, Ignorance and others.

It is a picture of life we all relate to – struggles, failures, victories, daily grind.

Anyone who says Christianity means you can glide through life is wrong.

Bunyan understands that. You have setbacks, sin to deal with, persecution, distractions. To finish the race of life is a struggle and requires incredible endurance.

What God actually does is give us the faith to persevere through the trials not provide miracles to avoid the trials. And these trials actually shape us and make us more like Christ.

The author of Hebrews is one who also understood the reality of how tough it is to stay faithful in our Christian walk.

But he also knows what we must do if we are to stay faithful.

Turn with me to 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.

**Because we have the example of those who have  
run the race before us**

**Let us determine to lay aside everything that  
hinders and the sin that so easily entangles**

**Let us run with endurance the race that is set  
before us**

**By clinging to Jesus who perfects our faith**

When you boil down what the author of Hebrews is saying – these sentences read like this:

Because we have the example of those who have run the race before us

Let us determine to lay aside everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

By clinging to Jesus who perfects our faith

**Because we have the example of those who have  
run the race before us**

*Because we have the example of those who have run the race before us*

He is of course referring to the examples given in the famous chapter 11.

Read through these names – Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab. None had a saloon passage through life. There were trials and suffering and pain.

But every one of them persevered and endured to the end. They had many reasons to fall away – they did not.

When the storms of life come – when we feel we can't go on – when we feel God has deserted us – stop and remember – there is nothing we face in this life that the saints of old have not already faced.

We follow in the footsteps of a long line of faithful men and women who persevered to the end.

The author of Hebrews uses athletic imagery here. He describes us as running the race of life.

But don't misunderstand the purpose of these witnesses.

All too often we read these verses and imagine an athletics stadium where we are running the race of life and the great witnesses of history are in the stands cheering us on.

That is not the point of these verses. The imagery is this – these witnesses are fellow competitors. It is just that their race was run before ours began. They ran the race of life. They struggled mightily – but by the power of faith given to them by God – they persevered to the end.

This is not a race with just one winner. You win by finishing the race and enduring to the end.

Their lives had struggle and pain – but they endured to the end – and they became a witness that we too can finish the race.

Just read their lives – imagine the trials Noah had – 120 years building an ark – no one listening to your witness – seeing the world you know washed away.

Abraham – the trials with Lot and Ishmael. Being asked to sacrifice your son.

Joseph – obeying your father and betrayed by your brothers – sold into slavery and then cast unjustly into prison and forgotten.

Whatever trial you face. Whatever makes you wonder if God has abandoned you. Whatever obstacle looms before you – these witnesses have been there. They were tempted to walk away from the faith – but they did not. They persevered to the end.

No one had an easy ride. Look at chapter 11 verses 35-38:

[The saints of old] were tortured, refusing to accept release, .... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ...—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

**But**, they **all** finished the course. Verse 39:

They were **all** commended for their faith.

God Himself enabled them to finish the course of life and be found faithful.

The saints of chapter 11 show us the whole spectrum. Some were Kings, some were prostitutes. Some were wealthy, some were impoverished. Some committed heinous sins, others seemed to have stayed fairly faithful.

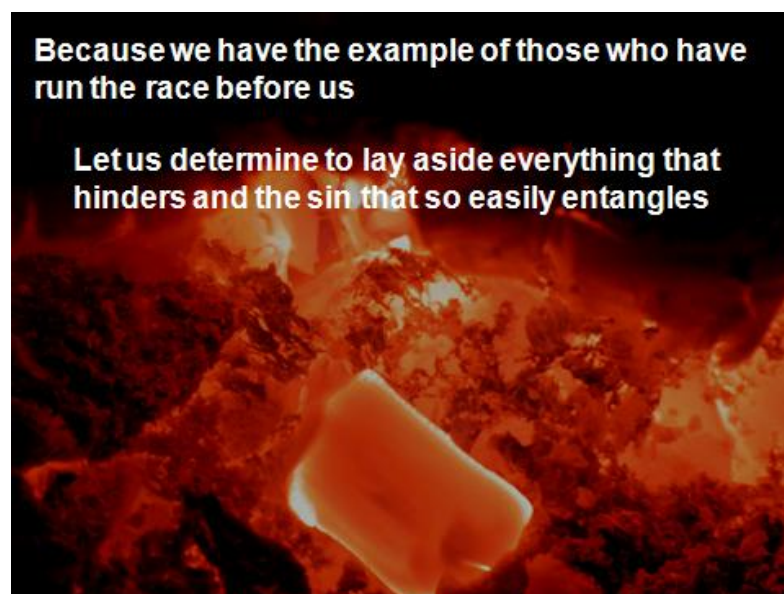
Their lives show the ups and downs – the struggles – the setbacks – the distractions – but when the end of their lives came – all of these were numbered among the faithful. They were commended for their faith.

Just this week Dudley and I were talking about the last 15 years of this church. We have seen men and women who seemed red hot on fire for the Lord walk away from the faith – and we have seen strugglers battle on and stay faithful.

Why do some fall away – why do others endure?

We sat with Ted Pearce – and what a joy to know he has persevered to the end.

So how do we run with endurance this race set before us?



Because we have the example of those who have run the race before us

First – Let us determine to lay aside everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles

Or as the ESV puts it:

Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely

Again these are athletic metaphors.

In preparing for the games – the athlete must discipline himself to get rid of everything that hinders him. First comes the excess weight that hinders.

The web advertisers are getting tricky. Now before you can read some articles – you have to watch their little video ad.

I watched one recently with Lance Armstrong working out. One glimpse and you could tell he did not have one ounce of fat.

If you are going to get your bike up the Alps you can't have any extra weight.

Fatties can't endure through the Tour De France.

But the image here is not just being overweight even more so the hindrance is trying to run the race with a ball and chain. If you have to lug that ball and chain around the track – it will be much harder to finish the race.

In the Christian life – what are the things that can weigh us down and stop us from persevering to the end?

Hindrances such as the love of money, lack of discipline, love of career.

I am not sure what they are with you. What actually hinders us varies from person to person.

Some of us get so wrapped up in career, mortgage, school fees – that the race of our life is just like our non-Christian neighbours. Our time and energy are monopolised by the world – so there is no time for the kingdom. And we excuse ourselves – by saying – I just don't have time.

Make time. If these things are hindering you – throw them off.

Examine your life – where is *your* ball and chain? God created you for more than a career, a mortgage and month to month living. He wants to use you for His glory.

Some of us are trying to run the kingdom race carrying fifty extra kilos and hobbled by a ball and chain and we wonder why we find it so hard to persevere to the end. We need to be done with lesser things.

You can't serve God and money. You can't run hobbled with bitterness and regret and anger and greed. You can't spend fifty years chasing a career and expect to do great things for God.

Whatever hinders us in our Christian life must be done away with.

And as well as these hindrances, we have the entanglements of sin.

We are to:

Lay aside every sin which clings so closely.

Again the metaphor is a runner in a race. You can't run if your feet are entangled in branches or rubbish which clings to us – you have to throw them off.

This word for clings is often used of being shackled.

Sin shackles us. You can't run the kingdom race if you are shackled by sin.

Your light is dulled, your mind is distracted, your conscience crushes you.

I don't have to run through the list of sins that might ensnare your life. You know whether there are sins – open sins or those hidden from men – sins that are impeding you.

While those sins are there you can't live fully for God. And they can lead to despair – questioning the power of God, questioning our salvation. They can lead you to turn from the faith.

It is here that we need to ask Jesus to help us throw those sins off.

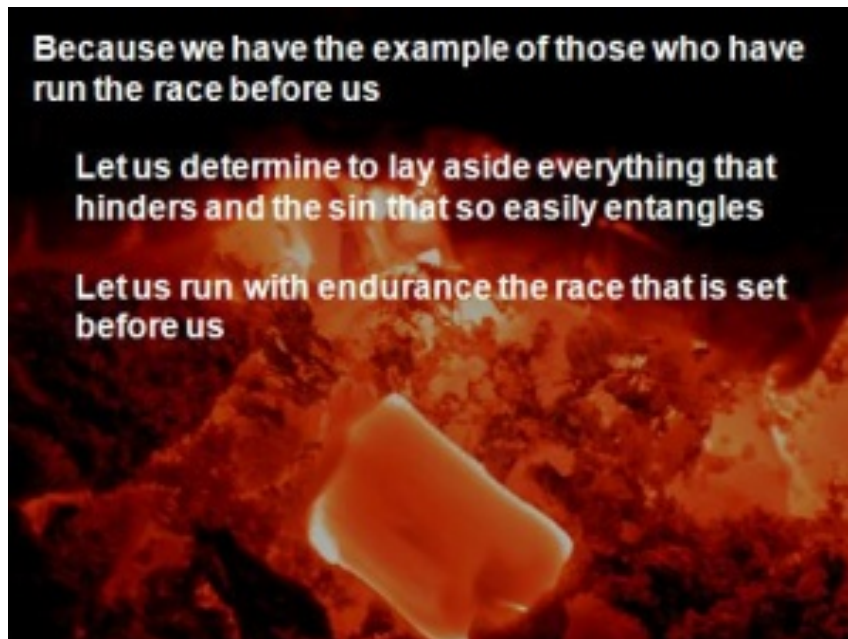
Read the Word, pray, find accountability, repent, call on the power of the Spirit, know that you are in Christ and therefore dead to sin.

John Chrysostom lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. He summed up our task like this:

Many of you have many times been spectators at the Olympic Games, and not only spectators but also enthusiastic partisans and admirers of the competitors. You know then that both during the days of the contests and also all night long, the herald thinks of nothing else and has no other care than that the combatant should not disgrace himself when he goes forth ... If therefore he who is about to engage in a contest before men uses such great forethought, much more will it befit us to be continually thoughtful and earnest, since our whole life is a contest. ... The Judge of the contest is seated at the right hand of the Father. ... Therefore I exhort you: let us lay aside all things and look to One only, as we strive to obtain the prize. ... Let us do all that will enable us to attain to the promised blessings.

We run to please Jesus – do all we can to please Him.

So, let me summarise. The author of Hebrews has told us:



Because we have the example of those who have run the race before us

Let us determine to lay aside everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles

AND

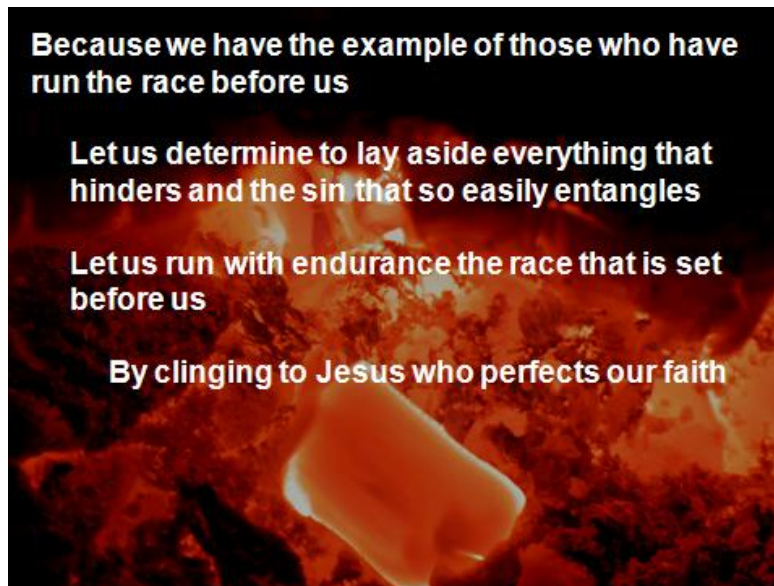
Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

The Christian life is not a sprint – it is a marathon. At times you run, at times you walk, at times you crawl – but the saint keeps crawling.

At times – everything inside you cries – I want to stop the race – that is where endurance and perseverance come in.

So – how do you find the strength to lay aside everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles – where does the power to run the race with endurance – come from?





By clinging to Jesus who perfects our faith

In our own strength – there is no way we can deal with sin or endure.

Which of us has not sat down and said – my life is too entangled in the world – my sin is crippling my walk with God – I must change – I will change.

And for a few days our quiet times are good – we get home on time to have family devotions – we find the time to get involved at church.

But then two months later we are worse than ever and totally discouraged.

Who hasn't felt like giving up – the Christian life is just too hard.

But, the author of Hebrews knows that we can't run the race in our own strength. So he tells us:

Cling to Jesus.

Claim the power and faith He gives. Ask Him to finish the work in you. Don't let Him go.

At first glance it seems strange to tell us to follow the example of the Old Testament saints – and then to tell us to cling to Jesus.

Did they persevere by clinging to Jesus? – They had never heard of Jesus.

It is at this point, we need to remember the context of this book.

The Jews understood that God is holy and man is sinful. The question arises – how does sinful man become holy so that he can be at peace with God?

The answer that the Law, the prophets, the ceremonies, the sacrifices – all gave – is through faith in the Messiah to come. Chapter after chapter of Hebrews makes this clear.

In chapter 11 – the point was that no one in the Old Testament was saved apart from faith in the One to come – Jesus. They trusted that God would keep His Word and send His Messiah. This is what kept them going in the darkest of days.

And they become witnesses to us.

The word used here for witness is the word – μάρτυς – where we get our word *martyr* from.

Before the New Testament was written – μάρτυς – simply meant witness. It was a word that referred to one who gave testimony or one who provides witness to an event or person. It was a word associated with the courtroom.

But, because being a witness to the power of Christ in the early church meant suffering and often death. By the time the New Testament was written, this word took on a different meaning.

*The Macquarie Concise Dictionary* gives what I think is a pretty good definition of what a martyr means now:

One who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle or cause.

We would say a martyr is:

One who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of the Lord Jesus.

The author of Hebrews wants us to know that these witnesses to the power of Jesus were martyrs – sometimes it cost them their lives – always it cost them greatly – but – they persevered to the end – and they did this by looking unto Jesus.

The runner in a race has his eyes fixed on one thing – the finish line.

Crowds, scenery, children – nothing distracts him.

So too for us – the world wants to distract us. Our sin wants to distract us. And the answer is to fix our eyes on Jesus who is **the founder and perfecter of our faith**.

The more you look to Jesus – the more the things of the world – hindrances and sins fade. The more you want to press on because you want Jesus.

The more you love Him – the more you keep moving towards the end.

Here is where the whole context of chapter 11 comes in.

Noah does not find the faith in himself to spend 120 years building an ark.

Abraham does not suck up the faith to leave Ur and to sacrifice Isaac.

Gideon does not move from a man who threshes wheat in hiding and a man who refuses to attack the Midianites with 22,000 men to a man who trusts God and attacks with 300 men by finding this faith in himself.

These men and women were given impossible tasks:

Trust that God can give a child to a couple past the age of childbearing

Get Israel out from under the might of Pharaoh

Take on the giant Goliath while you are still a boy

But Jesus was the founder *and* perfecter of their faith.

They trusted the promise of God concerning the Messiah to come and God used that faith in mighty ways.

We have our own impossible task. Live faithfully in a world that is beset by the distractions and troubles of our own sin and the temptations that assail us.

No one can do it alone. But Jesus can do it. He is the source of our faith and He perfects that faith in us.

Look back to the first three verses of chapter 11:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

If we struggle to believe that God can help us to overcome our sin and temptations and distractions then we don't really grasp who God is.

God spoke and the very universe leapt into being.

God who can create the wonder of the Milky Way and the splendour of Adam and Eve – is quite able to give you the faith and perfect your faith so that you can persevere to the end.

**He** founded your faith – **He** gave it to you – **He** will perfect it.

Philippians 1:6 – Paul says:

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.

We **can** run the race – we **can** throw off every hindrance and sin – by looking to Jesus who perfects the faith He gave us.

Jesus died on the cross – to deal with our sin.

Jesus sent His Holy Spirit – to empower us for our task.

He died so that you might run the race well. He longs to complete the good work He began in you.

Have faith in Him. Ask Him to strengthen you. Ask Him to unshackle you. Ask Him to free you from that besetting sin.

Fix your eyes on the cross. Jesus – God Himself – died on that cross – to free you from sin, to empower you, to enable you to shed His glory throughout this land.

Jesus did not die in vain. He did not die to see you struggle in your sin.

Do you really think He will fail to enable you to complete the task? Paul knows the answer. Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. Turn to Him as a helpless soul with arms outstretched and He will perfect your faith.

When the trials come. When the temptations come. When the sin comes.

Stop and fix your eyes on Jesus.

He died so you might run the race with perseverance.

He sent His Holy Spirit so you might run the race with perseverance.

He will not fail you or forsake you.

Trust Him. Ask Him. He will perfect your faith.

How do we know He is able to perfect our faith?

Let us look 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.

Because Jesus Himself ran the race with perseverance and that same power to persevere is what He makes available for us. He faced a challenge beyond anything we face and God preserved Him.

He fixed His eyes on the joy set before him and endured the cross, despising its shame.

When you read the accounts of Jesus' death – the Garden of Gethsemane – the cross – you wonder where any touch of joy could be.

Jesus knew what lay ahead of Him – that is why He cried:

My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.

But, Jesus was more concerned with what God's will was:

Yet not as I will, but as you will.

The joy of Christ came from obedience. In fulfilling the path set before Him. In leading many sons to glory.

And God enabled Him to face the cross and its shame and because He was faithful:

He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God

He knew the task, He fixed His eyes on the goal and He enjoyed the fruit of righteousness.

Jesus becomes the example of what God can do with faith. It is not easy – it is painful.

This world may have trials and tribulations – but God can set our eyes on Jesus by faith – fix our hearts on the kingdom to come – show us the cry of well done good and faithful servant – and fill us with joy even in the midst of trials.

And Jesus is faithful and powerful to preserve us to the end.

Here is where Brian Houston fails to understand the ways of God and Bunyan did understand them.

When trials come – when we struggle with sin and temptation – when the world seems to overpower us – this is not evidence that God has turned his back on us – far from it – it is evidence of His love for us.

God knows that trials shape us, mould us, make us more like Christ. They teach us to turn to Him in trust. Trials are for our good.

I discipline my children.

I tell them – don't touch the stove – they try and touch the stove – I discipline them. I love them and don't want them to be hurt.

I tell them – don't do drugs – if they disobey and try drugs – I will discipline them. I love them and don't want them to be hurt.

I teach them to discipline themselves to obey so they may enjoy the fruits of this life.

In the same way – Jesus – God’s Son – had to endure the pain of this world – the cross – for the fruits of righteousness and peace.

In the same way, God loves us and wants to perfect us and make us like Jesus. James 1:2-4 says this:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Don’t face a trial and cry – God doesn’t love me. Consider it joy because God will empower you to learn through this trial – to develop your faith in Him and learn to persevere in this life.

The most wonderful learning times of my Christian life have also been the hardest.

I have had some hard, hard days – in life, in ministry – but they have shaped me.

God wants me to be more like Jesus and this path leads through the valley of the shadow of death – not through vanity fair.

I know that God loves me because He disciplines me.

So many men and women have started well – only to have the evil one snatch away what was sown in their heart.

Or the word fails to take root, and only lasts a short time.

Or trouble or persecution comes and they quickly fall away.

Or the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke him, making him unfruitful.

But the one who perseveres. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

This life is tough. But when we fix our eyes on Jesus – we know have the joy of Christ to sustain us.

Brothers and sisters. I know this world is tough. Temptations are tough. Persecution is tough.

But when we turn to Jesus in faith – when we reach out as helpless children – when we fix our eyes on the glory of Jesus – He is faithful to strengthen us to persevere – He is able to perfect our faith. And through the pain – there is joy – a harvest of righteousness and peace. We learn the sweetness of God. We enjoy the fellowship of His sufferings.

And finally we can say with Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7-8:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.