

HEBREWS: JESUS IS BETTER

Hebrews 12 | *Looking to Jesus*

North Center | *May 28, 2023 | Memorial Day Weekend*

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I have 4 aims for the message this morning:

1. To **exposit** the Word of God faithfully from Hebrews 12
2. To **encourage** those who have entered into membership with our church body
3. To **exhort** (challenge) our young men and women who are graduating from school
4. To **engage** the movement in our culture often referred to as “*deconstruction*”
5. To **end** on time... (*and I figure that if I can accomplish 4 out of 5 of these aims... 😊*)

PRAY

Several years ago, my younger sister hiked to the peak of **Mount Kilimanjaro** (19,341’), which is the tallest mountain in Africa and the highest free-standing mountain in the world. Not many people get to see the world from a vantage point like that. **Here in Hebrews 12**, we have reached the mountaintop of this book. The first word in this chapter is “**therefore**” (Τοιγαροῦν¹) – which means that everything else in this letter (all the *comparisons*, all the *warnings*, all the *promises*, all the *examples*, all the *testimonies*) have been building toward this moment.

This morning, we are only going to focus on **the main sentence** (*which shows up in the first two verses*), but this sentence only makes sense if we understand the **CONTEXT** of the rest of the book.

We need to ask two questions: who is the audience & what is the message?

1. **AUDIENCE:** *professing Christians tempted to walk away from Christ & from the church*
 - “lest we **drift away**” (2:1)
 - “hold fast the confidence of the hope firm to the end” (3:6)
 - “hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (3:14)
 - “let us hold fast our confession” (4:14)
 - “if they **fall away**” (6:6)
 - “do not become **sluggish** (νωθροὶ)” (6:12)
 - “lest us hold fast the confession of our hope” (10:23)
 - “not **forsaking the assembling** of ourselves together” (10:25)
 - “those who **draw back**” (10:39)

In our present culture, this is often referred to as “*deconstruction*” or “*deconverting*”.

I have **conversations** almost every week with people who are in the process of walking away from the faith they once professed. And this isn’t just something that millennials are struggling with. This past week, I had a conversation with a woman who had been a professing Christian almost her entire life. Her family was highly involved in ministry. Her husband had been a pastor for years. They raised their children in God’s Word. She is intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate, well spoken, and she devoted her life to studying the Bible and advocating for the gospel of Jesus. And now (after all her children are grown and out of the house) she has completely turned her back on everything she once claimed to believe. She told me that her deepest regret is that she taught her children to love Jesus, His Word, and His church.

¹ This is the only time this Greek word shows up in the book of Hebrews.

It's heartbreaking. And it's as old as the book of Hebrews and as recent as 2023.

I came across a **statistic** this past week claiming that (since the year 2,000) somewhere around a million people walk away from the church every year. We've talked previously about why the Hebrews were tempted to walk away, but perhaps a more pertinent question for **us** to ask would be, "**Why are people tempted to walk away today?**"

There are undoubtedly many reasons why professing Christians walk away from their church and from their faith in Jesus:

- For some, it might be that they were raised in churches with more **legalism** than love. Their community of faith was built on a foundation of **rules** and **restrictions**, and not on a life-giving relationship with the living God. And so they naturally went looking for life-giving relationships somewhere else ... away from the church.
- Some were raised in **broken homes** that never provided a solid framework for their faith. God's Word wasn't a beautiful, vital part of their childhood. Once they left the home, their spiritual convictions proved to be nothing more than the childhood residue of their parents' religion, and it was all too easy to just walk away.
- Some attended **liberal universities** where they were overwhelmed by the polished rhetoric and philosophical arguments of antibiblical worldviews.
- Some moved to **megacities** (like Minneapolis) where their heart was captured by a **secular society**. They left Jesus to climb the ladders of success and chase the lights of entertainment.
- Some have witnessed enough of the **horrors** on this planet that they are no longer able to reconcile the God of the Bible with reality. How could a good and sovereign God allow this (fill in the blank) to happen?
- And many have been discipled (*not by their parents*) but by the online world of **social media** where deconstructing one's faith is celebrated and encouraged.

What does this mean? Well, it means a lot of things. It means that...

1. **If you are struggling** with questions, doubts, frustrations... with God, His Word, His Church, this world... **you are not alone**. Followers of Jesus have always struggled with questions of faith since the very beginning.² And what many people don't realize is that it actually brings God joy when we wrestle with Him (Gen 32:28). Last Sunday, our brother Sam preached from **Hebrews 11** on the beauty of faith. He showed us that it brings God pleasure when we put our faith in Him (11:6). But this does **not mean** that we must suppress our doubts, ignore our suspicions, or silence our questions. On the contrary, faith is believing in God (*His character & His promises*) even in the midst of our doubts, suspicions, and questions. Faith is trusting in God's Word even as we ask our questions and give voice to our doubts.³ God is not scared of your honesty. He can handle your darkest doubts. He can handle your questions. *He's God.*⁴

² Matt 8:26; 14:31; Mark 9:24; 16: 11-14; John 20:25. Kings, prophets, patriarchs, apostles...they all wrestled with God over things they couldn't understand. So, if you're struggling in your faith, you are not alone. And you never will be.

³ A great example of this is Psalm 77.

⁴ God is calling us to bring all of it to Him (Psa 62:8; 1 Pet 5:7).

2. If **somebody in your life has walked away from Jesus, you are not alone**. There are millions of moms & dads, husbands & wives, brothers & sisters, life-long friends... who know what it feels like to watch their loved one walk away.
3. If you are tempted to close the book on God, give up on Jesus, walk away from the church... **this letter was written for you.**
2. **MESSAGE:** *Jesus is better than anything else you could ever turn to for answers, for hope, for direction, for meaning, for joy...*

One of the defining moments in Jesus' ministry with His apostles was the day that many of His followers turned their back on Him for good (**John 6:66**). As the crowds were walking away from Jesus because they were offended by His Word, He turned to His disciples and asked them if they wanted to leave too. And this was their answer: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also, we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (**John 6:68–69**).

This is **the message of Hebrews**. You can walk away from Jesus (from His Word and from His body), but you won't find what you're looking for anywhere else.

- You were **made for Him** (**Col 1:16**).
- You were created to experience **life in Him** (**John 1:4**) & you won't find it anywhere else.
- The apostle Paul (*who was once an anti-Christian*) said that there was nothing in his life that even comes close to the joy of knowing Jesus (**Phil 3:4–10**).

For **the first 10 chapters**, the author of Hebrews has been pointing to all the things that his audience might have been tempted to chase after (e.g., *religious practices, famous people, supernatural experiences, heavenly beings, sacred buildings, other worldviews*), and he is showing them that Jesus is better.

In **chapter 11**, he highlights just a handful of people throughout human history who staked everything on their belief in this God.

- Even though they didn't have all the answers...
- Even though God's ways and God's timing often didn't make sense to them...
- Even though their lives were full of questions and doubts and mistakes and failures... they believed in this God – in His Word, in His character, in His promises, and ultimately in His Son, the Messiah, Jesus.⁵

All of this brings us finally to **this climactic chapter** where we read:

Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run *with endurance* the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

~ *Hebrews 12:1–2*

⁵ Their lives stand as a testimony that God is who He says He is, that He does what He says He'll do, and that God has "provided something better" (Heb 11:40) for His people in Christ Jesus than anything this world could have ever provided for them.

Here at the pinnacle of Hebrews, what is the author calling his readers to do? He is calling us to...

run with endurance the race that is set before us...
~ Hebrews 12:1

How many of you have ever run in a race at some point in your life? If you've ever run a race, then you have an idea of the **metaphor** that's being used here. The point of this imagery is simply to communicate that the Christian life is not easy. It never has been.

- Notice that he doesn't compare Christianity to a lawn chair (*let us sit with comfort in the lawn chair that is set before us*). 😊
- Notice that he doesn't compare Christianity to a boat ride...or a vacation in Cancun...or a stroll along the beach... 😊

No, he compares it to a race. Why? Because races are hard.

I have never particularly enjoyed *running*, and so I was never particularly good at *racing*. 😊

I remember one time **my high school track team** was competing up in the mountains in Flagstaff, Arizona (where the air was thinner), and I somehow got drafted to race with our relay team (*which meant that our relay team was super desperate*). I was about halfway through that race when I started really hating this experience that I was having!

- My lungs were on fire.
- My legs felt like jelly.
- My heart felt like it was going to explode.
- My body felt like it weighed 800 pounds.

And the question on my mind was... "*How in the world am I going to make it to the finish line?*"

Because **it's one thing** to start out running like an Olympic champion; but **it's another thing** to make it to the finish line. **It's one thing** to start well; **it's another thing** to finish well.

If **Odysseus and I** decided to have a race around the church building after the service today, I might look amazing at the beginning; but the question is: how will I be running 10 seconds into the race?

The point of Hebrews is NOT primarily about *becoming* a follower of Jesus; it's about ***finishing*** this life as a follower of Jesus. It's about running "*with endurance*" the race that is set before us.

In a world where so many professing Christians are falling before the finish line, the question is "***How do we run with endurance?***"⁶ These verses, this chapter, and the rest of this book were written to answer this question: how do we run the race (*that God has set before us*) with endurance?

Here are 3 answers to that question:

1. **Listen to the voices that are cheering you on (12:1).**

In the age of internet, television, radio, and social media, you are literally surrounded by voices yelling for you to stop running.

⁶ 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

- “You don’t need to be an active part of a **local church**. Why would you commit to a local church when it can be so hard? Just...stop. Quit. Walk away. Think of all the extra vacation time you could have.”
- “You don’t need to spend time in the **Bible** on your own. There are so many things in the Bible that are hard to understand and things that don’t make sense. Just...stop. Grab some lemonade, and let your pastor do the Bible reading for you.”
- “If your **marriage** is hard, just stop. Walk away. If **parenting** is hard, just stop. You don’t need to spend so much effort **disciplining your children**. Just let them be whoever they want to be. And **the same is true for you**: be whoever you want to be; identify as anything you want; do whatever you want to do; live however you want to live. You don’t need this ancient book, and all its rules.⁷

Those are the voices on your **sitcoms**. Those are the voices on your **talk shows**. Those are the voices on **TikTok**. Those are the voices coming from **Hollywood** and **Disney** and **Target** and **Amazon**. Those are the voices coming from the **secular radio stations** and **government schools** and **liberal universities**.

What I’m saying is, regardless of how we choose to engage the culture around us, we need to be aware of the message our culture is communicating. And the message is: *you don’t need God*.⁸

But these aren’t the only voices calling out to us as we run our race. The author says that “**we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**” (12:1). As you run, the life of every Christian (who has ever finished this race with Jesus) is testifying that **it’s worth it!** Every hardship. Every ache. Every pain. Every tear. Every exhaustion. Every cramp in the depths of your soul... it’s worth it.

Jesus is worth it. **Eternity** is worth it.
The **joy ahead** of you is worth it. The **glory** of God is worth it.

Instead of listening to the **culture** that isn’t running the race or to the **crowds** who have given up on the race, listen to the **cloud of witnesses** who have crossed the finished line and are yelling, “*It’s worth it!*”

2. **Let go of anything that would weigh you down or cause you to trip (12:1).**

What are you holding onto in your life that’s making it hard to endure as a Christian?

- Bitterness... Regret... Shame...
Let it go.
- Pride... A ladder (success, fame, wealth) ...
- A demanding hobby... Secret addiction...

Letting go is not easy, but it is freeing.

⁷ You don’t need to actually engage the culture around you. You don’t need to give your hard-earned money to the work of the gospel. You don’t need to fight against your sin (just embrace your desires). You don’t need to guard your eyes when you’re at the beach. You don’t need to guard your ears when it comes to the music you listen to. You don’t need to talk to people about your faith. In fact, you don’t really need faith at all. Look at all the happy, successful people sitting in their lawn chairs, sipping on their lemonade, soaking up the sunrays... who don’t have anything to do with Jesus. Just...stop.

⁸ If these are the voices you are listening to, this is the message that you will eventually embrace.

- Religious traditions...
- Unanswered questions...
- Fear of the unknown...

3. Keep your eyes on Jesus (12:2).

When life is hard, we tend to focus on the hardship.

- When money is tight, *what do we focus on?* Our money.
- When the marriage is hard, *what do we focus on?* How hard our marriage is.
- When God doesn't seem to be answering our prayers about something, *what are we focused on?* We focus on this thing we want that God isn't giving to us.

But when are looking at Jesus in the midst of our hardships, we also see joy – and that's what this whole book has been about.

Keep your eyes focused on who He is & on what He's done.

If He **authored** your faith, He will **finish** it. *He will hold you fast.*

If He **started** a good work in your soul, He will **complete** it.

When life is hard, keep your eyes on the One who endured everything for you.

When you are struggling for joy, keep your eyes on Jesus.

He knows you. He knows your struggle.

He is with you in your struggle.

He sees you. He's got you.

He is working all things together for your good.

When you start looking at the waves all around you, that's when you sink.

But when you're eyes are on Jesus... you can walk with Him on the waters of this life.