

Run the Race - Sunday, March 15th

We have reached the final two chapters of the book of Hebrews. And as I was preparing this week, I realized I don't exactly know where I'm going when I'm done with the book of Hebrews. I've been told I should start over back in Hebrews chapter one, but probably not going to do that.

But I really have enjoyed my time through the book of Hebrews. I hope that you have as well. I know it's been a little bit of a long series, but I've enjoyed how much God has brought into my life studying the book of Hebrews.

And I wish I could present everything that I learn as I study every week, but I can't. There's a lot of information that comes at me. But I hope that as you have been reading through and studying the book of Hebrews as we've been going through, that you as well have been enriched in your life, your faith has grown, and you're able to follow Jesus more closely.

Because that's truly the goal of reading the word of God and preaching the word of God. But last week we finished up chapter 11 and we looked at the cost of becoming a hero of the faith. And we highlighted four gentlemen in the end of chapter 11 there, which was Gideon, Barack, Samson and Japheth.

And we talked about how they were less than stellar characters. I mean, you could have picked... Well, actually, no, you couldn't have picked the worst group of people to highlight as men of faith. Because, well, they all had very glaring character flaws, which you and I deal with in our own lives, and it's common to us.

But God was able to take these men, despite their character flaws, and allow them to bring salvation to the nation of Israel. And it's amazing how God takes us, even with our character flaws, fills us with the Holy Spirit, and then sends us out into the world to make disciples and to preach the gospel, thus changing the lives of people in our world. It's a great responsibility and it's a great privilege.

Amen. So we talked last week about when we act in obedience to God, we get the joy of experiencing the thrill of being someone's hero. But also, at the same time, typically we get that opportunity through persecutions that we go through, trials that we go through, times of testing where our spirit is challenged to grow.

And we go through very difficult seasons in life. But yet, it's through that, that we often get to be the encouragement and hope for someone else who's going through the same trials. And say, hey, I've been there.

I've done that. I've walked through it. You will survive.

My dad had a saying when I was growing up that my, actually it's not, my grandmother, who, when she was wearing high heels, I think was four foot one. But you didn't cross her. But she had a saying.

I loved her. She had a saying that, no, maybe it wasn't her. Was it Aunt Cheryl? This ain't the hill you're going to die on? No, that was your, that's right.

Your mother, right? Wrong one. It was one of the great women in my life. I'll say it that way, and then I can just cover my bases.

Anyway, she had a saying that said, this ain't the hill you're going to die on. And we get to be that voice of encouragement to someone who's going through something and they're just like thinking it's the end of the world. But yet, we can come along and say, yeah, this ain't, this ain't the worst thing you'll experience in life.

It gets better, and you'll make it through. But it's during those times of persecution that we develop our testimony to witness to those who've gone through it. And so, that's how we closed up chapter 11, speaking to that.

And really, the book of Hebrews, as it continues, is not finished with faith. And that's why I went ahead and left my title series the same. Because chapter 12 goes right into the same concept of living by faith.

Because really, as Brother Peter shared in Faith Journeys so eloquently, our life and walk of faith is all about trusting God and being obedient to His Word. And so, as we walk out our life of faith, it really demands living righteously and holy before God. And making choices every day to do that.

To die to myself, to take up my cross and to follow Jesus, whatever He's leading me to do and whatever situation He's leading me in. Because it's those daily choices to follow God and to submit to His will that He puts us in contact with people who are dead in their sin. And if there's not a turning to Jesus, are going to spend eternity in hell.

But yet, you and I are the bridge between God and those who will possibly spend the rest of their life in hell. But you and I are given the opportunity, through following Jesus, to offer a different path. To offer salvation through Jesus Christ.

And I won't admit, I mean, I will admit... It's a good day. Word. And I will admit that it's very easy to stand up here and say that.

To be like, hey, go out and witness to people. It's very easy to say. Not always easy to do.

And often it can feel like a very lonely endeavor to try to go out and witness to people. Because it seems like the whole world is stacked against us. There's nobody in our corner, thank goodness, except for Sunday morning when we come here.

But outside of that, it just feels like we're walking alone and without people. But chapter 12 opens up with that reality. Because that is a part of the reality of faith.

Sometimes it can be a very lonely walk when God asks us to stand up for what's right. A lot of people don't like to do that. But what's beautiful about our faith is that we truly are never alone.

We have Jesus who never leaves us. We have the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. He gives us words to say.

He gives us comfort. He gives us encouragement. We have the church family here.

But we also have a great cloud of witnesses in heaven. That are encouraging us to continue this race of faith and to finish it well. Many people start, but few finish.

And as we are going to talk about this morning, people don't finish because there are things that try to hinder us as we run the race. There are things that want to block us and stop us and keep us from reaching the finish line. But yet we can overcome them.

And so, we're going to start in chapter 12. We're going to read verses 1 and 2. And then we'll dive into our passage this morning. It says, Let's pray this morning.

Father, I thank you Lord for the opportunity to share this word today. Lord, because as I've walked out my faith, it has at times been a very lonely walk. Or at least it's felt like a lonely walk.

Sometimes as I endeavor to do the right things, it feels like I'm pushing against the weight of the world all by myself. And Lord, what I love about living by faith is knowing that I'm never alone when I do it. The strength is not my own strength, but it's your strength.

So Father, this morning as we talk about and share this word in Hebrews chapter 12, Lord, we ask that you would anoint the words, anoint the ears, anoint the message, Father, that we would take it to heart. We would learn what you would have us to learn from it, apply it how we need to apply it, and to make us more like your Son. We ask that in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Chapter 12, as we know with the Bible, it was never written with chapter and verse.

It was just a letter, start to finish. And chapter 12 starts looking back to a few passages we talked about in chapter 10. He's trying to make this great push about faith that really started in chapter 10.

And I just want to touch those verses. I don't have them up there. I'm just going to read them for you real quick, sharing where this line of thought starting chapter 12 comes from.

In chapter 10, verse 14, it says, For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. And because of this truth, we must hold fast to our confession of faith, because God is faithful. There's something in this passage that says we must continue, we must push forward, and we have to hold fast to our confession of faith, because God is faithful.

Verse 23 of chapter 10 says, to the confession of our faith, which I just talked to you about it, because He who promised is faithful. It's real interesting that twice in chapter 10, there's this compelling that we have to hold fast. It's not just, it's not just, what will be, will be.

Ah, it's all good. There's a diligence that we have to have if we're going to run this race of faith effectively and to reach the finish line. There's something we have to put our hearts and minds to and our hands to and grasp and hold fast to it.

See, faith is always bidding us to move closer to Jesus, to get closer to Him. But if anyone draws back, Scripture says that my soul has no pleasure in Him. Chapter 10, verses 38 and 39 talks about those who draw back, they're not of the children of God, but rather those who believe and are continuing to press forward, they're continuing to hold fast, they're continuing to be faithful to run the race that God has given them.

And then, of course, chapter 11 goes into all the examples of faith, all that it takes for us to live by faith. And then chapter 12 begins with the word, therefore, tying all of these things that we've learned, because we've been told to hold fast, because we've been told that it's not one who draws back or shies away, it's the one who pushes in. Therefore, because of that, we have this great cloud of witnesses and we have this call, this command to endure the race, to run it with patience, so that we can make the finish line.

Because the goal is the finish line, amen? That's where we want, and the finish line is heaven. All that we have here, I love what Peter said this morning, this is called pre-eternal. It's his word, he said he made it up, I'm stealing it.

This is all pre-eternal. I mean, this is temporary. At one point we'll breathe our last and we'll enter into eternity.

For those who have put their faith in Jesus, it's going to be a great eternity. For those who have not, well, it's not going to be a great eternity. But you and I have the ability to affect where people live in their eternity.

So therefore, run the race of faith. It's our rally cry. Run the race and finish well.

So this morning we're going to talk about three things, or we're going to talk about several things that allow us to run this race of faith successful. As I was writing this the other day, I started laughing because I felt like one of those influences on the YouTwitFace, Instapick, Instatick, social media. No, it's Instatick.

It is also YouTwitFace, you know, YouTube, Twitter, which I guess is not Twitter anymore. Facebook. For those of us born last century, that makes a lot more sense to those not.

But that's okay. But I felt like one of those influences saying, hey, if you give me 40 minutes, I'll give you cheat codes to slide easily into heaven. It's going to work perfectly.

I know because I did it. It's going to be great. Your body is just like mine.

No side effects. Super easy. Just do these three things and you have it.

Ticket punched. You made it. And there's an element of truth there.

But we all know that living life is not always easy, right? There's no cheat codes. There's no super easy path to make success a guarantee. But we do find three truths laid out in these verses that give us the ability to know that we can finish the race of faith well.

So in Hebrews 1, the first truth is we have a great cloud of witnesses. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run. So after a whole chapter of examples of faith, it's safe to assume that these witnesses in this cloud are those who've come before us.

The writer says that I don't have time to go into all of these heroes of faith. And even since then, there's been 2,000 years of heroes that we can look back on and recall and look at their life saying, Hey, they've gone through it. They've walked through it.

And I can use their example of faith to make it to the end of my own race. But there's two things in this portion of Scripture that I want to look at. One, we're surrounded.

That word surrounded, of course, you might be thinking that's a very easy one. It means you're encircled. And that's true.

It means being encompassed about, being surrounded by, being bound to is another way that it's translated. And my mind immediately went to the Colosseum in Rome. There's the field down where all the action is happening.

But then there's a great stand of witnesses. If you like modern things, football works, I guess. You can have a football stadium.

And there's bleachers filled with all of these fans cheering us on and encouraging us to make it to the end, to win the race. All that is that we think of with a great cloud of witnesses encouraging us to finish. So God places people in our lives to help us reach the finish line.

They come alongside. They encourage us. They compel us to keep running.

Sometimes it's the fans. Sometimes it's a friend. Whatever it is, we have these encouragers that come alongside.

And as I was thinking about this the other day, I got very discouraged. Because really it's very discouraging to think how much encouragement I need to keep running this race of faith. You'd think I would have this welling up inside of me and there's this strength to be like, oh, I got to go.

I got to finish well. But yet I find if I left to my own devices, it's like, eh, today, again, same stuff. But God made us that way for a reason.

There's no lone wolves. I need you in my life. I need your encouragement to continue going.

I hope that you need me in your life to give you encouragement to keep going. But that's how God created his kingdom to be. One where we're interwoven together.

We're meshed together. We're pressed together so that we can both help each other along when the path gets difficult. We can encourage others when we're doing well to say, hey, it's tough, but we're going to finish.

We have to keep going. See, for me to keep on this straight and narrow, for us to keep on this straight and narrow, we need each other to do that. And chapter 10, again, reminds us of this.

It says in verse 24, let us consider or provoke. We talked about this a couple months ago. It's the one place where we're told to provoke someone.

It's not to provoke them to negative. It's to provoke them to good. Consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, but exhorting one another so much more as you see the day approaching.

What this scripture teaches is as we get closer to Jesus' return, it's not going to get easier to walk out in faith. It's going to get more difficult. And we require one another to make it to the end.

So, how many of you have watched the movie Up? The little cartoon house with the balloons. Hilarious show. And there's one character that highlights a fatal character flaw that we all face.

And it's not the old man. It's Doug. The golden retriever.

He's characterized with a deep loyalty to his pack, which becomes the old man and the child. I don't even know their names. But he's also contrasted by his uncontrollable distraction to squirrels.

And if you watch the movie, it's hilarious. And it never fails as Doug is involved in something to help the good guys defeat the bad guys. A squirrel shows up.

And then Doug's gone. He's chasing it. He's running off.

That's us. We're Doug. We're not dogs, but we're Doug.

Close. See, we need our herd. We need each other surrounding us and encouraging us to keep moving forward and to not abandon our faith.

Because in life, there's always going to be something that comes along and tries to take your attention, tries to move your focus, tries to get you to chase something that's futile. Doug never catches the squirrel. Not yet.

See, God has given us each other to help us finish this race. And we're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that do the same. Now, I kind of baited you to thinking a certain way about this great cloud of witnesses because I thought of it this way until I studied it this week.

If you're like me, you see this great host of people sitting in the background and yelling when I do something good. Like, hey, he actually made a right choice. Woo! Go Will! And then most of the time, it probably feels pretty quiet because they're like, dang, Will, you fumbled again.

But we have this concept of this kind of football stadium. Like if we're winning, they're cheering great. And if we're losing, well, boo, they're cheering not great.

But the reaction swings depending on how we're doing. But that is actually an incorrect way to look at this cloud of witnesses. So instead of this shouting group of spectators in heaven screaming at us where we can't hear what they're saying, the word witness is used more like someone in a courtroom where they're speaking or testifying to us about life.

They're giving specific encouragement from their own examples. So in chapter 11, that's really what this was all about. Abel in chapter 11 is telling us, hey, you can offer excellent sacrifices that God will accept.

You can live a life that is pleasing to Him. That's Abel's testimony to us. Enoch testifies that you can walk with God.

You can make it. It is not an effortless adventure. You can walk with God and please Him.

That's the testimony that he speaks to our hearts. Abraham, or Noah should I say, he testifies that you can build a life that will bring salvation to other people. You can follow Jesus in such a way that your life will be a light to those who are lost in the darkness.

Abraham testifies that faith will allow you to accomplish things even when it seems impossible. He was 100 years old before he had a kid. Abraham's like, trust me, if it looks impossible, there's a baby coming.

Moses testifies that faith allows us to overcome fear and to defeat every plan of the enemy no matter what it is. Rahab testifies that faith can save anyone who believes. And as that list continues, they're all speaking something very specific about their faith that we need to hear that, hey, you can make it.

So this great cloud of witnesses isn't just up there screaming. They're looking at Josh saying, hey Josh, it's okay man, I was there. I know, it's tough.

It's looking at each one of us and it's giving specific examples in our life saying, you know what? Yeah, man, sucked for me too. But I made it. You can make it as well.

That's this great cloud of witnesses that we have that's up there testifying saying, don't quit. Every day, waking up with the renewed blessings of God saying, hey, it's another day to go out there and win. It's another day to go out there and follow Jesus.

It's another opportunity to be like Him. No matter what's hitting the fan, no matter what's going through your head, no matter what life looks like, it's an opportunity to win. So we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that testify that the effort is worth it.

Endure to the end. The promises are true. Eternity is great if you hang on to the end.

The second truth that I see in this passage is this. If we want to finish the race, we must make every effort that we can to finish it. So what does that mean? Therefore, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us. So we are to lay aside every weight and the sin that ensnares us.

They're two different things. They're not the same. And it's not some great mystery.

I've just gotten through the book of Numbers so that tells you where my mind was. And it's not some great complicated thing. It's not like you have to offer seven bulls on the sacrifice and pull out the fat of the liver and put that here and give the grain offering with a cup of oil and all these other difficult things.

It's not that. To lay aside simply means to put away from you, to cast off, to jettison away, to remove. So we are to put away the weight and the sin.

I want to deal with the sin first because I believe it makes the most sense to us. Most of us understand the concept of sin. Sins are the things that we do that separate us from God because we choose not to obey or trust what God has told us.

That's the essence of sin. When Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden sinned, it wasn't that they ate the fruit. It's that they didn't trust God's Word to be true and they were disobedient in the act.

That was the sin that was committed. Disobedience. Not trusting, not believing God at His Word, but choosing to believe something else.

So some examples of sin. We're all familiar with the Ten Commandments. Sins are lying, stealing, murdering, coveting, disrespecting your parents, having idols that replace God, fornicating, which is sex outside of marriage, adultery, which is sex with someone who's not your spouse, lust, pride, blasphemy, bitterness, wrath, evil speaking.

I mean, you want me to go on? There's a list of them. Yeah, someone's like, stop calling out all my life here. But these are things that separate us from God and produce death.

Romans teaches that sin, the wages of sin is death. And while we're all tempted to sins, there are some sins that we're more prone to. There's some sins that we easily fall into, which this talks about.

And they trip us up. Whatever reason, there's not a whole lot of temptation that goes into it. I'm not going to spend much time here because all of us know what this is in our own lives.

We know the triggers that push us in that direction. And if you don't, learn them, because the enemy knows them and he sure triggers you whenever he needs you to fall off the bandwagon for a little bit. If the enemy's smart enough to learn your triggers, you should be smart enough to learn your triggers.

And there's a scripture, I didn't look it up, but it says, how do we resist sin? We run away. Flee. You abandon the place.

You go away from it. If there's something in your life, you know, like, man, I'm gonna get triggered here, then run away from it. Abandon it.

Find a place of safety where you cannot be worried about being tempted and falling into sin. So we have to put those away so that we don't get tripped up and not finish our race. We're also to put away weights.

So what is the weights that the writer talks about? First off, they're not sins, but they can lead to sin. So several years ago, Creed and Billy and I joined a group of fathers and sons, some father-son hike up to Heartlake. Anybody ever been to Heartlake? Well, it's a very easy hike of just five miles.

That's what they said. And, you know, walking five miles, that was torture enough, and it really was an easy hike. And we were to spend three days up there at Heartlake camping out, and there was a group of like, probably 25 of us that was going up there.

So of course, if you're gonna do that, up there for three days, you need water, you need food, you're gonna, you need sleeping gear, you got to pack a backpack, and you got to walk up there. So we began to pack our backpacks, and all three of us had backpacks, but I was dad. These guys, my two sons, they were younger.

This was, I don't know, good Lord, it's probably like four or five years ago. So we started packing everything because everybody had to carry their sleeping bag. Then we started putting food and camping supplies and knives and hatchets.

My boys were young enough, they wanted to cut everything down. Actually, really fun story, while we were there, there was this tree that was kind of falling, and a lot of the dads and sons took turns during the whole weekend until we knocked this tree over into the lake. I don't know that that was the wisest thing, but from that point on, all of your body just started running down the log and floating in the water.

A lot of fun, but we had to bring the hatchets and all the stuff that you need. So in my bag, being the dad, I had the tent, I had the majority of the food, which was heavy, the water, and all those things. I don't know if you've ever been packing, but that stuff gets heavy after a while.

It starts to add up really quick. You might think, oh, this little can of beans, that ain't so bad, but by mile three and a half, you're like, I'm just gonna pick this up on the way back, and you want to start setting things down. And so, to add a caveat to this, I spent many years roofing and not taking care of myself, and I don't sleep well on hard, stony grounds, and so I packed this twin air mattress that had a battery pack.

I know, you weren't sleeping on the ground for three days, so. I wasn't going without it, okay? There were some comforts that I was taking with me. So when I got finished packing, my bag was, I mean, it was heavy, but I was like, this is not bad, sitting at the house, you know, put it on, and you know, like, oh yeah, I could do this, well, yeah, yeah, that's no problem, you know.

Billy was like 12 or 13, and he had a few things in his bag. Creed was, man, he might have been seven or eight years old, and he didn't have much in his at all, but anyway, there wasn't one thing in that bag that we didn't technically need. There might have been a few frivolous things, but they were all things that were, we would have said in the midst of it that we needed these things for this weekend, so that we could survive it, and we can get through.

Simple stuff, food, clothing, water, camping gear, a few creature comforts, like an air mattress. It was a weight that ultimately hindered my hike to the lake. It got heavy, because it wasn't a great, it wasn't a very easy flat walk.

It was a nice walk home, but it was not a nice walk there. A lot of it was uphill. See, we often carry weights that hinder our walk of faith with God, and they're not all bad.

They're not sin, even. And only you know what they are. I can't tell you what a weight is for you.

But I will say this, how you figure out what's a weight as you look and examine your life, it's something that isn't necessarily sin, but it hinders your spiritual growth. Ouch. Is there something in your life that's hindering you from growing up in Christ? One of my favorite commentators so far in the book of Hebrews has been McLaren, Alexander McLaren, and he had a very long sermon about the subject of weights.

And here are some of the things that he listed that could be possible weights in people's lives. And of course, they're generalizations, so take them how you will, but weights could be family relationships. Weights could be affections or love for people or things.

It could be joys. It could be pleasures. It could be talents.

It could be abilities. It could be work or responsibilities. It could be knowledge and study.

It could be social life. Truly, anything can become a weight if it begins to drag you away from following God. And it doesn't have to be sin.

The pursuit of money. And while none of these things seem bad on the surface, you might even look at this list and be like, man, you have to have these to be a Christian. I can't not have, I mean, even as a pastor, when I read the book of Timothy and Titus, has to be one who manages his family well.

I have to have good family relationships if I'm to be a pastor. But it could be a weight if I choose to put so much emphasis on that it drags me away from serving God. McLaren said this, he said, a weight in this context is not defined by its nature.

In other words, it's not defined by what it is, but it's defined by its effect upon your spiritual growth. So is there something in your life that's hindering your spiritual growth? Well then, according to the writer of Hebrews, it needs to be put away, needs to be laid aside, needs to be cast off. So I figured I would give you some examples of those who allowed weight to drag them off track from Scripture.

Matthew chapter 19, a rich young ruler comes up to Jesus and says, what must I do to have eternal life? Oh, Jesus said, that's easy. And he gives him several of the Ten Commandments, you know, do this, do this, do this. The rich young ruler is like, yes! I do all of that since I was a kid! And Jesus is like, great, you lack one thing.

What's that? Go and sell your stuff and give to the poor. Not a sin. He didn't have, if you take the Scripture at its context, he wasn't dealing with sin because Jesus listed off the commandments and he said, I've done all of those things.

I've kept those commandments. So he's not sinning. So Jesus says, tell you what, get rid of this weight that you're carrying around.

Oh Jesus, I can't do that. I can't. And it says he left because he had lots of possessions.

He was carrying something that he couldn't give up that hindered him from following Jesus. Not even sin. It was just a weight and he couldn't put it down.

Whoa! Another example. This one ends better, I think. Luke chapter 10.

Jesus is teaching at Lazarus's house. The disciples and Mary are all sitting around and Martha's running around trying to serve all these people, to do all these things, to get food in people's hands. Not a bad thing.

She was helping and she was serving and she was busy doing what she thought she was supposed to do. Not sinning. Helping.

But it was keeping her from doing the one thing she should have been doing. What did Jesus tell her? You should be like your sister Mary, sitting here, listening to my teaching. Not flitting about, being busy.

Sometimes the weight of busyness, just having to do this, having to do that, responsibilities that we have, can keep us from being able to follow Jesus, to listen to his voice, to read his word, to spend time in prayer, because we're busy. I just don't have time. Jesus, I'll serve you one day.

I don't have time today. My calendar's booked. You didn't make the cut.

Sorry. I don't know what your weight is. I know what mine is.

But I do know how you can find it out. And it's regarding the third truth of this passage. Hebrews chapter 12, going back to verses 1 and 2, it says, Therefore, since we're surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which easily ensnares us.

And here's the caveat, let us run the race with endurance that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. So before I dig into this, I would like to ask you a question. How many of you would agree that reading your Bible and praying is a vital part of your walk of faith? Now, don't raise your hand for this one, but how many of you would agree that you struggle with reading and praying? I'll raise my hand for all of us if you want.

See, to run the race that is set before us and to be able to identify the sins and the weights that we carry, we must have complete focus on the prize. The prize is Christ. Verse 2 says, looking unto Jesus.

See, anything that keeps us from focusing on Jesus is going to fall in one of two categories. It's going to be a sin that we're choosing to be disobedient and not trust God with, or it's going to be a weight, something that is keeping us from being able to do what God has asked us to do, keeping us from being able to follow God the way he's asking us to follow him. Then it may not necessarily be a sin.

They're squirrels, if you will. Jesus is like, hey, follow me. Squirrel! Jesus is like, hey, hey, hey.

Oh, hey, Jesus. Squirrel! Woo! That was fun. Sorry, Jesus, I chased that squirrel.

We overcome weights and sins when we look to Jesus and he becomes the most valuable thing that we're chasing. No longer do the squirrels interest us because I have something better to focus on. No longer does the lust of this world, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, they're not important to me because I have something of more value that I'm looking to.

See, this race that we're running, it's not a hundred-yard dash. It's not going to be finished in five minutes. It's a marathon.

You run it over a lifetime. Every day you have to wake up and you have to choose to get back on the track and to continue running the race of faith. You have to be diligent.

You have to hold fast to that confession of faith. You have to make the purposeful, specific choice to begin running. I hate running.

Running the race requires endurance. It takes time. And God works in us to help us find freedom from all of the things that want to distract us from accomplishing the task and the goal that he's given us in life.

See, like kids, we all want God to move now. God, I need this and we expect an answer today. He wants, I shouldn't say he, we want him to do all the work, do all the preparation, take all the responsibility, and we just want the excitement of a job well done, experiencing the fruit of his labor.

But yet that robs us from the appreciation of accomplishment. See, God chooses to work with us and through us to fix our eyes on Jesus. You know how he does that? By teaching us discipline through persecution.

That we come to the point where we realize there's nothing more valuable than Jesus in my life. All else can fall away. Nothing is as important as looking to Jesus.

It's the only thing that allows you to finish the race well. Every other thing is a squirrel that wants to pull you anywhere else but Jesus. What's funny is the squirrel will never run to Jesus.

If Jesus is saying, follow me, the squirrel's going this way. Oh, he keeps us from following Christ. Stand with me this morning.

To finish this race we must do three things, three easy steps. First we must hear the testimony of all the witnesses that tell us that we can live by faith, that we can run the race and finish it. We receive this

encouragement by being a part of our church family, by spending time in the Word of God, by praying and listening to those who have gone through the persecution and the struggle and have successfully come through it.

It's those people who will come alongside of us and say, hey, you can make it. Don't quit. Don't quit.

Don't quit. Don't quit. Quitting is easy.

Walking away is easy. Don't quit. Push forward.

The second step is that we must put away the weights and the sins that seek to distract and hinder us from our spiritual progress. Stop chasing the squirrels. It'll get you killed.

And I'm not talking about one where you die. I'm talking about the eternal death. Squirrels will never get you into heaven.

It's keeping your focus and your eyes on Jesus every day. Every day. Which is the third step.

Always keep your focus on Him. There's one way to enter heaven. One door.

One relationship. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except me.

Except through me. Jesus is the only way to heaven. There's no squirrel that will get you there.

And it's focusing on Him that will allow you to finish your race of faith. And at the end of your race, to hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the rest that I have prepared for you.

That's the prize. Amen. Father, we thank you for your Word this morning.

Lord, I thank you, Lord, as we've entered into chapter 12, God, that you lay out the truths that I must know to enter into heaven. The things that I must do, Father, one is to put my faith firmly in you. Because you are the truth.

You are the only way. And Father, as I live out my life, and as we run this race, I pray that you would continue to let your mercies be new every morning. That as I get out of bed, I will look at the day and say, I will choose today to follow you.

I'm going to lay aside everything that's going to stop me. And I'm going to seek your face. I'm going to look to you to help me run my race well today.

Father, let us all have that attitude and that focus as we face each morning, as we face each day that has its share of troubles and trials and persecutions, knowing that, Father, you never leave us nor forsake us, and that you are always with us to lead and guide us through. Lord, I thank you for this church and all those who call this place home. God, I pray that you would visit each one, especially this week, in their heart, in their devotion time, and that you would draw them closer to you.

In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.