

Harris Creek Baptist Church  
Jonathan Pokluda  
Series: Family Matters  
September 12, 2021

Perseverance  
Hebrews 12:1-3

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

Let's go Church! How are we doing? Awesome. It's so great to be with you guys. My daughter is running cross country. I don't know why. I thought I raised her better than that, but here we are, and it's hard! I mean, there are so many difficult things about it. They practice at 6:30 in the morning three times a week, which is really unfortunate, because it means Monica has to get up earlier than normal. Sometimes she wakes me up, so it's hard! The other day she emails us in the morning, and just says, "I'm not feeling well after running two miles this morning. I'm not feeling well. Would you pray for me?" So, we're in the kitchen, I'm getting ready for work, and we're praying for her. Then the phone rings, and it's the school, and they tell us that she got sick in class. We're like, "Ah, man." So, I ask the teacher, "Hey, well, did she make it to the trash can?" And she said, "No, she didn't make it." Oh, what a way to start the day! I feel bad for her. And it's weird. It's weird that your body can be so physically exhausted that you get sick. That you have this response to that because you're so tired from running. You're so physically tired from running that your body is kind of rejecting it.

I think that's probably true for some of us today. That we feel like life is this marathon that we're running, and we're so tired from running we feel like we need a break. And maybe even we're physically exhausted. Maybe we came into this room today with some sense of a physical exhaustion from running, and we need a break. I'd love to tell you that as you think about the Christian life as a marathon, if you're tired, you're doing it wrong. That'll preach! It would be great for me to stand up here on my toes, and say, "If you're tired, you're doing it wrong! Let me give you a better way!" But a marathon is actually the Holy Spirit's favorite metaphor for the Christian life. This long, sometimes exhausting, run of faithfulness. It really repeats that metaphor throughout the Scripture, that illustration throughout the scripture. Old Testament to New Testament. I'll read you some. It's not an exhaustive list by any stretch of the imagination. These are just some verses that I captured that I'll put in front of you.

**"I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding." Psalm 119:32**

**“But those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.”**

**Isaiah 40:31**

**“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” “Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.” 1 Corinthians 9:24-26**

**“You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?”  
Galatians 5:7**

This is Paul at the end of his life. He’s writing a letter to Timothy, and he says this: **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” 2 Timothy 4:7**

We’re in this series called Family Matters, where we’re talking about issues that matter to this family. In Week One we talked about how important it is that we make disciples. That you, as the church body, as a member of the church body, that you are investing your life into someone else, multiplying the faith. In the second week we talked about what is a disciple and what marks this idea of love, and how do we take this word that our culture has robbed from us and redeem it for the purpose of the Kingdom. Then last week Nate gave us such an important message on community, that we can’t do this alone. That there’s people that we go through life with, and that we have a role to play in their life and they have role to play in our life. Today I want to talk about the long run of faithfulness. The long run of faithfulness. And really just to say, “Stay in the race. Stay in the race.”

Our staff put 40 topics on a white board on Tuesday. We didn’t have our normal rhythm of Monday being sermon prep as it was a short week. So, I brought the whole staff in on this and said, “What do you think the body of Harris Creek needs to hear?” We put 40 topics on the board. We narrowed it down to two, then we narrowed it down to one, which was this message. This idea of full devotion, and understanding that it can be exhausting, and just an encouragement to stay in the race - the long run of faithfulness.

I think with the new school season, it can feel like we’re in a marathon. We’re tired, classes, schedules, work, relationships, then there’s politics, to finding time to get a haircut or go to the gym, the day-to-day meal prep, trying to manage finances. It all gets so heavy and it all gets so weighty. As we’re running, there’s days where it can feel exhausting. I think the temptation is to think it’s exhausting because I’m doing it wrong. Some of you might be. You might be doing it wrong. But just because you’re tired doesn’t mean you’re doing it wrong. There are aspects of this life where we need encouragement through the Word. He repeats this idea: **“Do not grow weary. Do not grow weary. Do not lose heart. In this world you will have trouble.”** There’s a

part of the Christian journey that can be challenging and physically exhausting. And that's why we need the reminder from this text today.

I think there's a big temptation to give up. In fact, deconstruction is such a buzz word right now. Like, how do we break down and rebuild? And I think people are deconstructing because they're realizing that it's hard. I'll tell you that when you are hovering over the trash can and you are about to lose your breakfast because you ran, it's not the right time to say, "Do I really want to do cross country?" That's what it feels like. "This is the moment that I need to reconsider my commitment." And when you're in the Christian life and you get hit with some challenges, some hardship, whether it's work, relationships, finances, just stuff that comes up. You're like, "Man, am I sure about this Jesus guy?" That's when you begin to reconsider all things. And what happens is, people ask the question, "Am I sure that I'm on the right lane of Christianity?" And the way that it's cloaked in, is, "Is there something out there more true?" But really, what so many people are asking, "Is there something out there less hard?"

It looks like, "Is there something more true?" But what they're really asking, "Is there something easier?" And I see person after person go on this deconstruction journey of reading or watching or listening to some rogue theologian trying to find some tributary idea that might be a simpler form of Christianity, rather than the Orthodox fairway that has survived the Church for thousands and thousands of years. So, if you're tired, I'm glad you're here. I'm going to be in Hebrews 12. As we move through this text, we're going to look at the obstacles to running, the opposition to running, and the object of running – what we are running toward in this long race of faithfulness.

In Hebrews 12, we don't know who the author of Hebrews is. But what we do know is that it was written to a church that was tempted to grow weary, exhausted, faint-hearted. They were beginning to falter in their faith because of the Jewish rules that surrounded them. So, this is what was written into that context. Hebrews chapter 12, we'll look at three verses. **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."** Hebrews 12:1-3

So, if you're tempted to grow weary and lose heart, this is your text. But it begs some questions right out the gates. **"Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,"** Who are the great cloud of witnesses? It starts **"Therefore,"** and when you see a 'therefore', you have to ask, "What's it there for?" any time you see it in the text. And so, you back up one chapter. Hebrews 11 is what is known as the Hall of Faith, not the Hall of Fame, but the Hall of Faith. It's a chapter all about faith and people who have acted faithfully. This is how it starts. Hebrews 11 now, the context of Hebrews 12 and the great cloud of witnesses. **"Now faith** (he starts by defining it) **is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.** (Right? So, faith, here's the definition.) **This is what the ancients were commended for.** (People who were faithful.) **By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.** (And then he goes like

this; this is how it reads... Long list...) **By faith Abel, by faith Enoch, by faith Noah, by faith Abraham, verse 20, by faith Isaac, verse 21, by faith Jacob, by faith Joseph, by faith Moses's parents, by faith Moses, by faith the people, by faith the walls of Jericho fell, by faith the prostitute Rahab.** You see, all these people who've lived lives of incredible faith, and you think, "Oh, they were just like heroes, and they did everything right." No, there's murderers in there, there's prostitutes in there, there's schemers like Abraham in there. And you think, "But they lived an easy life. They had everything coming to them because they were God's man or God's woman." No, it says this, **"Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two;** (Man, I think we read, "They were sawed in two" and we think, like, Vegas magic show. We don't feel the weight of that. They were sawed. They were people, this is talking about, in history, who, because they followed God, they were cut into two pieces. What?) **they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated, the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.** (We don't even know their names. They lived a life of hiding in caves because of their faith.) **These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."** **Hebrews 11:1-40** ...or they would be made complete.

Here's what he's saying: These people who did these extraordinary acts of faith, they didn't even see the coming Messiah. They simply lived in hope that He would one day show up. And now, we have a History Book to show us that He was here, that He raised from the dead. And He has millions, hundreds of millions of followers throughout the world because of God's greatest act of faithfulness through His son Jesus, by His wounds we are healed. We have the benefit of looking back. They only had the benefit of looking forward. They had to live with hope, and now we have the Gospel.

So, what does it mean to witness? Witness can mean two things. Witness can mean to see. I witnessed an event. Or witness can mean to tell. I witness by sharing. Here, you see both of those definitions. These were people who lived by faith, and we see their journey, and they testify. They give witness to us that it was worth it. That today, the person who was sawed in two in front of their children, says, "Hey, it was worth it! It was worth it! Like, where I'm at, and what I see in the presence of God, in His Kingdom forever! It is worth it! You can follow the path or faithfulness!"

So, he says in verse 1, **"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."** My first point is:

1. *There are Obstacles to the Long Run of Faithfulness*

There are obstacles. There are things that make it difficult. Things that hinder you, and a sin that entangles you. Those things make running the race of faithfulness difficult. There are obstacles to it. There are things that make you want to quit, and so you are to throw them off. And he's telling you that you need to get prepared like a good runner would. There's a reason that the uniform for a runner is different than the uniform for a football player. A football player has

pads, and a helmet, and heavy stuff. You don't walk up to the starting line with shoulder pads on. No, actually, if you watched the Olympics and you watched the runners, it is not a contest in modesty. You know what I mean? They strip down for that. They make cheerleaders look like they're dressed for going skiing. They're wearing nothing, or hardly at all. To run that race as fast as they can, they throw off everything else.

So, he says, "There's two things that I want you to throw off. Two categories: things that hinder you and things that are sin." Which means there are things that hinder you that aren't sin. There are distractions. There's so much of life that's difficult that we bring on ourselves. We fill a calendar with. What are those things? They could be things, like in our context, they could be things like select sports, or it could be things like club sports, or it could be things like rec sports. And then some other stuff, too, that aren't even sports. Things like golf. No, that's still a sport. Things like shopping. Things like vacation and travel. Things like work. Things like smart phones. Things like social media. What's your thing that hinders you? What is it? It's a good thing, or a morally neutral thing that can hinder you. So, what does the Scripture tell you to do with that thing that hinders you from running the race? This is one of those moments where I'm going to say something, where you're going to say, "Surely he doesn't mean that." And I'm really about to mean what I'm about to say. So, deep breath (J.P. takes a deep breath), what does the Scripture say to do with those things? Throw it off. Get rid of it. Eject it. You're like, "Wait a minute! Hold on! So, you're telling me that I'm supposed to tell my kids that they can't play baseball anymore? Or soccer? Or whatever?" And here's how I'd answer that, "Maybe."

Let's just consider that for a moment in our context. You sit a child down who's really good, really gifted, going somewhere, and you say, "Hey, guess what? We're going to have a hard conversation. You're no longer going to play baseball." "Wait, what? Hold on. My whole life is baseball!" "I know. That's kind of the issue. It has consumed our family in such a way that we're no longer able to run the race marked out for us, and so, we're not going to do this anymore." "But that's crazy!" "I know. We kind of signed up for crazy when we said we were going to follow Jesus. It is crazy, especially in our context. We've been tempted to make this a god, and that's crazy." But that's going to have a radical impact on that child, because they're going to learn in that moment that Jesus is greater than baseball. Jesus is greater than soccer.

Now hold on. There's some of you that that's your mission field, and you see it as such. You're there, and you're thinking, "All right, who are lost people? And this is how I can get in this avenue." And you're making it all about Jesus, and you're saying, "This doesn't matter to us, and we're not going to compromise anything in the faith to do this, but as we're able we're going to do this. We're going to do this with excellence in a way that points to God, and we're going to bring others to God and to the Church." Because of what you get to do, I think God is watching and going, "Yeah! Way to go, man! (J.P. claps) Hit that ball with a stick! That's awesome! Man, I'm going to help you hit it far! I'm going to send it over the fence, so that you can point them to Me." In that situation, I think you can do it to His glory.

Fishing is not a bad thing, but when fishing gets in the way of your walk with Jesus, it's now a bad thing. "You're telling me I shouldn't go fishing anymore?" Yeah, if that's your attitude, I promise you, you should probably hang it up. You should probably stop. Maybe never go fish again. It's become an idol in your life, and people have been afraid to tell you that. And I'm just telling you, it's an idol in your life and you need to see it as such. You probably need to stop and

replace it with something that pushes you deeper into a relationship with God. These are morally neutral things that can become distracting, and then they're bad things.

And then there's this other thing. That's sin. That's another category. Some of the most exhausted people that I've met in the Church are people who are concealing sin in the Church. They're engaged in it and they're hiding it. They're not confessing it or forsaking it or talking about it. They're just cohabitating with it. I meet with them, and they'll have dark circles under their eyes and they're completely worn out and exhausted, and Christianity is like a sweater that doesn't fit. And they're like, "I don't know what's wrong." And I'm like, "Man, is there anything that you want to bring to the light right now? I'm not trying to trap you, or catch you, or get you. I'm trying to free you. Is there anything that you want to bring to the light? I know it's hard to say, but if you try to run toward Jesus while you're holding onto this sin, you won't be able to. You can't pursue Christ and sin at the same time. You just can't." Now, that's some of you, but in a way, that's all of us, because we all have blind spots. And that's why Nate's message last week was so important. That we would have life groups and people that would come around us to help us see blind spots, which are things that we can't see. Every single person who hears me right now, in this room, out there watching online, you have blind spots. We have blind spots, and we have to have people who will help us see those things.

The Christian life is a long run of faithfulness. It's a marathon. If I was to give you a word picture of what it's like, there's these obstacles. There are hardships in it. It's like, have you ever heard of the Tough Mudder? Anybody run the Tough Mudder? (Picture appears on screen of people running through mud, with one man carrying a heavy tree limb while raising some barbed wire for another man to crawl under.) Why? I've got friends of friends who ran it. No friends that ran it. (Picture on screen shows one man being pulled out of a muddy pit and another standing waist deep in the pit.) But I know people who know people that ran it. And it's a difficult marathon. And there are these obstacles in it, and there's obstacles that you can't get through without the help of other people. (Picture shows three men and a woman straining as they pull another woman up a wall.) They have to help you to get over it. You have a team. And then there's some obstacles that your team can't even get through with the help of another team. And I thought, what a picture of the Christian life, that you would sign up for this. You're going to get dirty. You're going to come up against things that you can't do on your own. You have to have the Body of Christ around you. You'll have to have other people help you endure what is in front of you. It's the only way, and that is the Christian life. These obstacles. You don't want to run this entangled by sin. That's like trying to run with rope wrapped around your ankles. And so, it's difficult. Why does somebody run that race? For one, the sense of accomplishment. But two, the act of endurance, to build something up in them, to strengthen something up in them. And that's why he says what he says, next.

**“And let us run, with perseverance, the race marked out for us.”** Where it says, ‘the race’, that word is agon. It doesn't necessarily have to be a race. It's some sort of competition that takes great endurance. It's where we get the word ‘agony’. This is where we get the word agony. He's telling us something as Christians that is really important. There's a part of this journey that's agonizing, and it doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. You could translate this in the English like this, **“And let us endure the agony assigned to us.”** And let us endure the agony assigned to us. Agony is defined as extreme physical or mental suffering, and it's fair for you to say, “Why would I want to sign up for extreme physical and mental suffering?” But people do all the time.

Anyone that signs up for the Tough Mudder are signing up for this. They say, “Hey, I’m up for that race.” And it’s all about expectations, and that’s why I think these expectations are so important. That as you begin this journey of faith that you would know there’s aspects of the journey that are difficult because if you sign up for Christianity thinking, “Oh, I’m going to trust in Jesus so that I get to Heaven and an easy life,” you’ve made your god, not the real, one true God. And at some point, your god is going to disappoint you and you’re going to despair. But, if you sign up for this Christian life like, “I believe it because it’s true, and I want to live a life that is a journey to the finish line that is Christ. And I know it’s going to be hard, but that’s what I’m signing up for, because it produces something godly in me.” That’s the context of this chapter.

All of the rest of the verses in Hebrews 12 are about how God disciplines those He loves. How He disciplines those He loves. He’s producing something in us. It’s like Romans 5:3, “**Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character, and character hope.**” Or James 1:2-3, “**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters (J.P. reads Harris Creek instead of brothers and sisters), whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.**” And that’s why he can say, “**And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.**” You cannot grow stronger without opposition. This is a simple rule of life. You cannot grow stronger, think about that. You cannot. It will not happen ever, in any way, in any context, can you grow stronger without opposition. That’s my second point.

## *2. There is Opposition to the Long Run of Faithfulness*

It’s hard because opposition requires endurance. This is like resistance training. Resistance training means that you push against something that resists you pushing against it, so that you can build up muscle, so that you can build up strength, so that you can build up endurance. So, the run, in this race, it fights back. It’s full of resistance. So, it’s not just the sin that you carry and things that hinder you, but there are things in front of you that will be challenging. They’ll be a resisting force. They’ll be temptation; things that you have to resist. So, I’m not taking sin with me, but it doesn’t mean the sin and the temptation of sin goes away. There’s no cruise control in Christianity. I can never get to this place and shift into fifth gear and take it easy. Every day’s a fight. Every day’s a fight. And that’s why he says, in verse 4, “**In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.**” And he’s right, I haven’t. I mean, I’ve met with lots of people, and myself, been really challenged. “This is so hard, and I want to keep going back, like a dog to its vomit. To that!” But I haven’t resisted to the point of shedding blood. You’re right.

And I want you to know, the more you resist sin, the more you resist sin. Like, the more you fight sin, the more you are able to fight sin. You build up a resistance to it, and this opposition, it strengthens you. Resistance training strengthens you. You’re pushing against something stronger. It’s very easy to understand this when you think about muscles, because we press up against the bench, the bench fights back, it resists us, the muscles break down and they grow bigger. But did you know you can do this also with stamina? So, it’s like, I’m training for a marathon, I run a mile. Then I run 1.2, then I run 1.4, then I run 1.5 and I’m building up my endurance by pushing my body to the limits that it can take.

You can do this with courage. You can actually build up courage. You can put yourself in places and situations that require courage, to strengthen your courage in situations where you'll need courage. And you're like, "Are you sure?" Yeah. That's what they do with Navy Seals. They fabricate situations that require a lot of courage in the training grounds, so that when they're in the battlefield and there's bullets flying by their head, they have learned courage. They built up courage.

Check this out. Check this out. You can do this with faith. With faith. You can put yourself in situations where you need faith, where you have to trust in God. You have to rely on your belief in God, even when it doesn't feel like it. Everything in my body says this is not the thing to do. It's not comfortable, but I'm going to act in faith right now, and your faith gets bigger. Your faith muscle grows. Think about that. And the opposite is true. If you avoid situations, at all costs, that require faith, your faith muscle atrophies. It gets weaker. I want to create the most comfortable life that I can possibly create and keep to ourselves, and just be as selfish as we can. And you get to a place where you think, "I'm not even sure that there's a God anymore." Pursue deconstruction, figure this thing out. It happens all the time.

So, what does it look like to put ourselves in places that we would never do unless we were completely convinced that there's a God who's sovereign, who loves us and controls all things? What would that look like? But here's my encouragement for you. When it feels like you're failing, that's often when you are building faith the most. Think about it like this. When I do squats... If I did squats, as I'm pushing up against something, and I'm trying to do several reps, what's happening is it feels like I'm getting weaker. Like I can't keep going; I can't do another one. But what's happening is, I'm actually getting stronger. The muscle is breaking down so that it can build up bigger. This also happens in your faith, so when you're in this place where you feel like, "I can't go on. It's too much, God. I could never do this on my own. I absolutely need You right now." And it feels like you're J.V. Christian, like you're not doing it and you're about to give up. Those are the breakthrough moments where you actually build your faith up. Those are the moments where you get to trust God and your faith gets bigger and stronger. So, if you're in this place where you want to quit, it may be your greatest opportunity to actually live by faith. May that be an encouragement to you.

I think there's so much, and I don't mean to pick on it at all, just talk of deconstruction right now. And I just want you to know that this is my point. You cannot deconstruct something built on the sturdy cornerstone of Jesus Christ. In almost every situation of deconstruction that I've been a part of, it has been someone who has followed, and were tempted to worship, a person rather than Jesus. Now, maybe that person was the mouthpiece of Jesus, but we've taken their ideas instead of God's ideas. And we've built our faith on their ideas instead of God's ideas, and this is why it's so important to understand. Mark Driscoll, he's going to disappoint you. John Piper is going to disappoint you. Beth Moore is going to disappoint you. Jonathan Pohlman is going, I promise you, I promise, to disappoint you. So, I pray that you would see past me to a Savior who will never disappoint you, and you fix your eyes on Him. Do not let me get in the way of Him. Where you get a lot of my opinion and my ideas, test it. Where it's His, it's tried and true. Live according to it. Bet your life on it.

You fix your eyes on Jesus. It's what he says in verse 2, **"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame,**

**and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** In this race, Jesus is the pioneer of our faith, and the perfecter, or completer, of our faith. He’s the starting pistol and the finish line. He’s the track you run on, and He’s why you run. He gives you the ability to run, and he’s the prize you get when you finish the race. Jesus is everything. That’s very ethereal. It’s one of those things you say at a conference and people jump to their feet and start clapping, not us because it’s early, but it’s one of those things that sounds so good. Write a book about it. What does it mean? I’m going to try to make it practical in just the few minutes that we have. My third point is,

### 3. *Jesus is the Object of Our Long Run of Faithfulness*

He’s the object. He’s why we run. He’s what we’re running toward. He’s what we fix our eyes, we fix our eyes on Him. And if we don’t, we will not stay the course, we’ll get in the wrong lane, we’ll drift to the right or the left. We’ll be distracted by things that hinder us. He’s paved the way of faithfulness. He’s shown us where to go, but He’s also how we build our faithfulness by focusing on Him. And here’s what I mean. Many of you, if I gave you a quiz right now, you would say you are saved by grace. It’s a term you’ve heard, and maybe you understand it. It is grace, a gift you didn’t deserve, that has saved you. You’ve got that. So, I’m saved by grace, I understand, but then you think, “But I’m sanctified by works.” No, you’re not. You are sanctified by grace also. What happens when you trust in Jesus, is the Holy Spirit is deposited in your life, and so what do I do? I surrender to that Holy Spirit who produces good works in my life. I surrender to Him. I let Him drive. Here’s what that means. You cannot get a quiet time in the morning by your own strength. It won’t count. How ‘bout that? You’ll do all the right things, and you will wear yourself out because you did it by your bootstraps. So, it’s a letting go. It’s a surrender. It’s like, “God, I can’t, but You can.” So, I fix my eyes on Jesus.

I met with somebody this week, a life group leader, deacon-level, all in, Varsity Christian, for lack of a better term. They’re getting after it. They love Jesus, but they’re so tired. Completely exhausted. Completely worn out. About 40 minutes into the meeting, I said, “Hey, can I ask you two questions?” What two questions do you think I asked them? This really mature believer who’s leading life groups here. I said, “Between one and ten; ten being certain, one being not so sure, if you were to die today, how certain are you that you would go to Heaven?” To which they said, “I’m a ten, of course.” I said, “If you stood before God, and He said, ‘Why should I let you in?’ what would you say?” “Grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is all I have. The work that He did through Jesus.” I told him, don’t stop depending on that work. That’s all you have. It’s all you have today. It’s not a one and done. You have to fix your eyes on that.

Here’s what I’m saying. Some of you this week, you’re here and you’re a believer and you’re going to get into Heaven, but you did not fix your eyes on Jesus this week. Right now, as I’m saying it, it’s a revelation that that’s true. You’re like, “He’s right. I didn’t. Honestly, the entire seven days have gone by, and I haven’t one time thought about Jesus on the cross and raising from the dead. I haven’t even thought about that.” And you are going to utterly wear yourself out. I’ve got a verse for you. Galatians 3:3, “**Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?**” Are you so foolish? It’s like taking off in a 737 jet and getting 30,000 feet above the ground and beginning to flap your arms. Thinking, “I’ve gotta help this thing. I’ve gotta help it stay in the air.” And it’s as silly as that.

It's as silly as that. That you would get to this place, and you would think, "I really need to help God right now in my journey." No, you need to surrender everything to Him. It's a removal of things; not an addition of things. Maybe making space for things.

So, you say, "Well, what do I do? What do I do?" The application is very simple, and it's so simple that in some ways it's going to be difficult. You fix your eyes on Jesus, the Author, the Beginner, the Starter, and the Perfecter, the Completer, of your faith. "What do you mean, fix my eyes on Him?" You set time aside every day. This is it. This the application you're looking for. Some of you are like, "Just give me something to do." Here it is. You set time aside, in your day, to be still and do nothing except for fix your mind on Him. Picture Him on the cross. Focus on that. That was for me. Every day, do I literally believe this guy died and came back to life?

It's like when I'm traveling, and I miss my family. I miss Monica. I've been gone for a week and I'm just like, "Man, I want to be home. I want to see them." I pull up pictures, and I'm not reminding myself what they look like. I pull up a picture, "Oh, I remember being there. I remember that day. We were at the beach. It was so good: the breeze, the perfect weather. And we had that conflict on the way there, and I'm in the moment. I remember what happened before that day. We were on our way to church, and it was crazy. We got in that argument." I remember these things. My affections are stirred as I look into the pictures. In the same way, you set time aside to remember the work that Jesus has done for you on your behalf. That you have an inheritance laid up, glorious riches set aside for you, for a hundred years from now, and a hundred billion years from now. That you're going to be with him forever and ever and ever. And you will not remember the hardest day that you ever had on this earth. It will fade to the background in such a way that I don't fully understand it. You'll be able to laugh about it. I don't even get that, but you will only be able to experience joy in any semblance of a memory of that thing. **"Because of the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame..."** He's the author and the perfecter of our faith, so we fix our eyes on Him. You have to be really careful about what you fix your eyes on. What you set your sights on. You know what I mean? You want to be careful.

Have you ever heard of Matthew Emmons? Know who that is? Matthew Emmons? He's a world class athlete; truly the best of the best in his sport. (Picture on screen of smiling Matthew Emmons, with many gold medals hanging from his chest and the high-powered rifle balanced on his shoulder) He's an Olympian, and the reason you haven't heard about him is because his sport is rifle shooting. He's a target sniper, but he's an elite. And he's the best there is the most decorated athlete in his field. He was in the Olympics. He'd already won one medal, and he was about to claim a second one. He'd already fired one shot; hit right center bull's eye. Here he was, about to take his second shot. Everyone came that cares about this sport. Everyone came to see him because he's so much better than the next person, if you will. The whole crowd holds their breath. He takes aim. He fires a bullet at the target. All he has to do to get a medal is hit the target. He drills the center of the bull's eye. It's what he does. It's what he's been doing all his adult life. It's what he's been training for. He hits the center of the bull's eye, but the crowd responds very differently than he anticipated. It's because he hit the wrong target. He accidentally aimed at the target on the left of his target. He hit it, but it was the wrong target.

I think there's some of us, you're going to hit what you aim for: You're going to get the house in the suburbs, the white picket fence, the German Shepard, the two kids with the neat names.

They're going to make straight As, and they're going to play select ball, and they're probably going to go to college on a scholarship. But make sure you're aiming at the right target; that the whole thrust and trajectory of your life is something so much bigger than that. That in a minute, in a moment, you're ready to hang it up if in any way it hinders you running the race marked out for you. You want to make sure you're aiming at the right target, fixing our eyes on Jesus.

In summary, in the long run of faithfulness, there are obstacles: sin and things that hinder us. There is opposition. It is hard, difficult at times. But Jesus is our object. He is why we run, and who we are running toward.

I went to my first cross country meet this week. First one, I didn't know what to expect. It's interesting that when they show up, there's people who are there that understand the course, and they walk the runners down the course. They show them, "Hey, this is where you're going to run." This is what the great cloud of witnesses have done for us. They say, "Hey, this is the journey that you run. There's parts of it that are hard, but it's worth it." When I showed up, the runners had already taken off, and so I'm just sitting there in a field with a lot of people just waiting for someone to show up. I didn't know what to expect, but all of a sudden, I look to my right and there's this girl running toward me. And then another one, and then another one. I don't know why I had the emotion that I did, but to see these girls pushing through a difficult situation, agony on their face. Wanting to quit but putting one foot in front of the other. I had this emotional response. I'm not a guy who never cries, but I'm also not the guy who cries at a race, unless I'm running it. And I had this emotional response.

I watched them as they made their way around the field, and then there's this finish line; these two ribbons side-by-side, that you run through and cross the finish line. And I saw these girls giving it their all, just running. People were like, "You can do it! You can do it!" And they crossed that finish line, and they just collapsed, some of them to the ground. They're trying to catch their breath. For some of them, though, it looked like they were in a hurry to do so, because then they would get up, and they'd come on the side of the ribbon, and with any energy they had left, "Come on! You can do it! Come on! You're almost there! You can finish! Come on! I know you can!" They started cheering on the other people, and I thought, "What a picture. What a picture for us. That we're going to fall across that finish line. But we've got Brothers and Sisters who've made it there before us, saying, "Hey! Stay in the race! Don't give up! Don't give up! Yeah, the Enemy's crafty! No, stay in; one foot in front of the other! You can do it! It's worth it! It's worth it!"

We gathered her things as the crowd dispersed. The vast majority of the runners were finished. People started going home, and we were walking to my truck. We were halfway to the parking lot, which is a good way off, when I saw this one girl by herself make the corner and head toward that little row of the finish line by herself. I said, "Hey, let's go back. Let's go back." So, we got there on the side, and we said, "Keep going! Keep going! You can do it! Keep going! One foot in front of the other! You're almost there! You're almost there!" She crossed that finish line, and some family member, I don't know who, threw their arms around her, and said, "I'm so proud of you for finishing!" And it dawned on me, in the Kingdom, she has the same inheritance as the person who finished first. The same inheritance. All the same. She gets the Kingdom, the same Kingdom, that the girl with the first-place medal gets. It's hers. And it's worth it. It's worth it. The only way you'll get there is fixing your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your

faith. Who, **“for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame,”** so that you would not grow weary, persevere through the trials that you face in this life. Let me pray that you would.

Dear Father, would you help us in that? Would you help us in that? Help us finish the race. So many things that we're tempted to run off course for, get distracted by, give ourselves to, and give our lives to. Lord, would you help us stay in the marriage when it gets really hard? Would you help us stay in the Life Group when it gets totally beat down? Help us stay in the Church when it feels like a sweater that doesn't fit. Help us stay in your Word when we don't like reading, and it doesn't really make sense, and it seems old. Help us stay in the prayer when the text message ding beeps and we wonder who it is. Would you help us stay in the fight? When we're tired, would you help us stay in the race? When we're weary and exhausted, would you move our minds back to your Son, Jesus Christ, who did the work on our behalf? Please, God, please, in His name. Amen