

Running the Race (2)

This morning, we return to our study of Hebrews 12:1–3. We began this passage back in October, and today we finish it by looking at verses 2–3.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The author of Hebrews likens the Christian life to a race. This is not a leisurely race for exercise or enjoyment, but an agonizing and demanding race that requires encouragement to run, the avoidance of hindrances, endurance (12:1), and focus (12:2-3).

By way of reminder, our encouragement to run is the cloud of witnesses. A great cloud of witnesses surround us, the faithful saints of Hebrews 11, whose lives testify that the race can be run and finished by faith. These witnesses endured loss, suffering, and even death, trusting in the Lord God's promises, even though they had not yet received them. Their witness proves that a life of persevering faith is not only possible, but well worth living.

Second, we are warned of hindrances that must be avoided. To run well, we must lay aside every weight, anything that burdens, distracts, or slows us down. Even good things can become weights when they hinder or impede our progress. We must also lay aside the sin that clings so closely, for all of these things drain, entangle, and obstruct our running. Therefore, every weight and every sin must be put away, laid aside, and cast off.

Thirdly, we are called to run with endurance. The Christian life is not a sprint; it is a lifelong marathon. It is filled with difficulties, suffering, and weariness. Endurance is a steady and resolute faithfulness; pressing on day after day, refusing to quit, and refusing to look back. The race set before us is not random; it has been sovereignly arranged for us by the Lord God, who knows every twist and turn and supplies mercy and grace for every step.

Yet, encouragement to run, the avoidance of hindrances, and endurance alone are not enough to finish this race well. To finish well, you need focus. This brings us to Hebrews 12:2–3, where we are commended to lift our eyes from the race itself to the One who ran it perfectly, Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Hebrews 12:2-3 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

To run the race set before us with endurance, we must:

1. Look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (v. 2a).
2. Look to Jesus, who endured suffering for the joy set before Him, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (v. 2b).
3. Look to Jesus and consider him, him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (v. 3).

Hebrews 12:2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

To run the race set before us with endurance, we must look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. The word translated "looking" comes from the Greek *aphoraō* [af-or-ah'-o], which means to look away from one thing and fix your eyes on another. This term does not refer to a passing or casual glance, nor distracted or divided attention. "Looking" is a decisive turning of the eyes away from all other competing objects and a steady, concentrated focus upon one, Jesus Himself.

"Looking to Jesus" means that you will look away from all other distractions, whether they be comforts, fears, joys, losses, sins, or successes. "Looking to Jesus" means that you will look away from your circumstances, suffering, discouragements, and from relying on yourself or others. "Looking to Jesus" means that you will fix the eyes of your soul upon Jesus alone and keep them there, refusing to look anywhere else.

However, it is not this effort alone that sustains the runner, but the object of the runner's vision, what the eyes of the soul are fixed upon. John Bunyan captured this truth memorably in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian was traveling to the Celestial City with a great and heavy burden strapped to his back, a weight that bent him low and slowed his progress. He had fled from the City of Destruction and entered through the Wicket Gate, but his burden still remained. It had not fallen off through his efforts, resolve, or discipline. Bunyan writes:

Now I saw in my dream, that the highway up which Christian was to go, was fenced on both sides with a wall, and that wall was called 'SALVATION'. Up this way, therefore, burdened Christian ran, but not without great difficulty, because of the heavy load on his back. He ran on thus until he came to a place where there was a hill, and upon that hill stood a Cross; and a little below, at the bottom, was a sepulcher.

So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up to the Cross, his burden fell off his shoulders and back, and began to tumble, until it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more! Then Christian was glad and joyful, and said with a merry heart, "Jesus has given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death!"

So he stood still awhile to ponder and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the Cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked, therefore, and looked again, until tears flowed down his cheeks!

Christian did not remove the burden through any effort of his own. He simply looked to the cross, and as he looked, the great and heavy burden fell from his shoulders, and rolled into the open sepulcher, and it was buried, never to be seen again. Bunyan understood what the author of Hebrews teaches us: the great and heavy burden of the guilt and condemnation of sin cannot be removed by striving harder, but only by looking to Jesus. Then, and only then, is our burden removed, and we are free to run unencumbered.

This emphasis on looking is not unique to the book of Hebrews. Throughout the Scriptures, the condition and direction of the eyes are repeatedly used to describe the spiritual health and orientation of the heart. The Lord Jesus Christ used this imagery in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6, He explained that what we fix our eyes upon ultimately determines whether our whole life is filled with light or with darkness.

Matthew 6:21-23 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. 22 "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, 23 but if your

eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

Jesus taught that the eye is the lamp of the body, meaning that the condition and direction of the eye determines whether or not the whole body is filled with light or darkness. Throughout the Scriptures, the eyes are closely associated with the heart, and in many passages, the eyes are virtually synonymous with the heart itself.

Deuteronomy 4:9 Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul prayed for their church that God would grant them the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him:

Ephesians 1:18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

In Matthew 6, Jesus moves from the importance of having the heart in the right place (v. 21) to the necessity of having healthy eyes fixed on the right things. This is the same concern behind the exhortation in Hebrews 12:2, where believers are commanded to look to Jesus, to fix the eyes of the soul on Him in a deliberate and undivided way. Our eyes function like a window through which light enters into the body. If a window is clean and clear, light will fill the room. If a window is dirty or distorted, light will be hindered. Likewise, the amount and quality of spiritual light that fills a person depends upon the condition of the eye. A healthy eye results in a life full of light, while a bad eye results in a life full of darkness. The term translated as 'healthy' means 'single,' pointing to a singular gaze and undivided focus. When the heart, represented by the eye, is single and fixed on Jesus, the whole body, your spiritual life, will be filled with clarity, light, truth, and strength. The literal idea behind this term is singleness, which is why the King James Version renders it this way: "When thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light." A healthy eye is not clouded by cataracts, distorted by blind spots, or confused by shadows, blurs, or double vision, but is singular and undivided. A healthy eye sees clearly what is set before it, and the clarity of what is set before it guides the whole body.

This emphasis on singleness of vision is consistent with the broader biblical teaching on purity of heart. Jesus declared that the pure in heart will see God (Matt. 5:8), and purity carries the idea of being unmixed and undivided. In the last chapter of 1 Chronicles, King David fervently prayed for the people of Israel and for his son, Solomon, that they might both possess a pure heart.

1 Chronicles 29:17-19 I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. 18 O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you. 19 Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments, your testimonies, and your statutes, performing all, and that he may build the palace for which I have made provision.

King David prayed that their hearts be utterly devoted to the LORD God. King David prayed that God would grant them a whole heart, a single-minded heart, an undivided heart, a heart that will keep God's commandments, testimonies, and statutes.

In contrast, an impure heart and an evil eye lead to spiritual confusion and ultimately, darkness. The Lord God desires our hearts to be entirely devoted to Him and our eyes to be firmly fixed upon Jesus. As you run the race that is set before you, let your eyes look directly forward to Jesus. Let your gaze be straight ahead at Him. Remember, you are sustained not by divided attention, or worldly fixation, or inward introspection, but by a clear and undistracted view of Jesus. Charles Spurgeon remarked,

How frequently you who are coming to Christ look to yourselves. "Oh," say you, "I do not repent enough!" That is looking to yourself. "I do not believe enough!" That is looking to yourself. "I am too unworthy." That is looking to yourself. "I cannot discover," says another, "that I have any righteousness." It is quite right to say that you have not any righteousness, but it is quite wrong to look for any. Look to Him, look at Him, study Him, know all you can about Him, and meditate upon Him.

Do not fix your eyes on any other thing, on the race itself, its obstacles, other runners, or even the cloud of witnesses. Keep looking to Jesus. Keep looking to Jesus, continually. Maintain a settled orientation of the heart and a singular focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is also important to remember that when the race becomes agonizing, when trials intensify, suffering grows heavy, persecution overwhelms, and you begin to grow weary, this command does not change. Do not look within for strength, or outward to worldly devices for help, but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

The term author is rich in meaning. It refers to a chief leader or prince, one who goes before others as a pioneer, opening the way. In Hebrews 12:2, it describes Jesus as the founder and trailblazer of faith. He is the One who initiated it and He is the One who currently leads His people forward, providing both the path and the power to follow. Hebrews does not leave this path undefined. It shows us where the path was first cut. The trail Jesus leads us on is the very road He Himself pioneered through His suffering. This was made clear earlier in the letter:

Hebrews 2:10 For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Jesus did not just point out the path for us to follow; He cut the path Himself through great and painstaking effort; His perfect obedience, His submission, the surrendering of His will to the will of the Father. Through His suffering, He pioneered the way that will bring many sons to glory; this road He Himself walked first. This truth is pressed even further in Hebrews 6. Christ not only walked the road to glory, but He also arrived at the final destination. And His arrival was not for Himself alone, but for all those who follow Him by faith.

Hebrews 6:19-20 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus was our forerunner. He ran the entire race to its glorious and triumphant end. On our behalf, He went ahead of us, marked the path, and secured access for us to follow. As our great High Priest, He has entered the inner place behind the curtain, not for Himself, but for us, guaranteeing that all who are united to Him by faith will most assuredly arrive at our final destination: the end of the race, the glorious presence of God.

Jesus is the founder of our faith and He is the perfecter of our faith. The term perfecter (Greek *teleiōtēs*) describes a state of completeness, perfection, or complete maturity. Jesus brings faith to its designed end, to its full realization and fulfillment. He is not only the author (originator) of our faith, but He is also the One who carries it through to completion. He initiates, He regenerates, He equips, He matures, He sustains, and He finishes. Jesus is at the beginning of our race and Jesus is at the end of our race. He authored our salvation, He showed us the right path, He finished the race, and now He awaits our finish. He awaits our finish to reward those who have endured and persevered to the end. What God initiated by His mercy and grace will be brought to completion in glory. Therefore, fixing our eyes on Jesus is not optional; it is essential.

As we run the race set before us, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, and we do this in three practical ways.

Hebrews 12:2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

In His earthly life, Jesus endured great affliction and suffering. Consider for a moment what He endured: He left the perfection and glories of heaven, emptied Himself, and was born in the likeness of men. From His earliest years, He faced threats, hostility, and exile. As He carried out His earthly ministry, He endured temptation, disrespect, rivalry, mockery, misunderstanding, unbelief, rejection, name-calling, gossip, slander, intimidation, betrayal, false witnesses, false arrest, unjust trials, conspiracy, beatings, flogging, imprisonment, and public shame.

Yet Hebrews tells us that He despised the shame. He did not internalize it, accept its verdict, or allow it to define Him. He did not view Himself as a victim of the cross, nor did He allow the shame to outweigh the glory that lay ahead. Though stripped, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and paraded as a criminal, Jesus counted that shame as nothing in comparison with the joy set before Him and obedience to the will of His Father. A.W. Pink remarked,

We scarcely think of associating this word “despising” with the meek and lowly Jesus. It is an ugly term, yet there are things which deserve it. The Savior viewed things in their true perspective; He estimated them at their proper worth: in the light of the joy set before Him, He regarded hardship, ignominy, persecution, sufferings from men, as trifles.

Jesus Himself, bore the full weight of the world’s scorn without being ruled by it. He bore the immense ridicule and shame, and He was submissive to the will of the Father, being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus endured the cross by fixing His gaze on the joy set before Him. His joy was not found in the suffering itself, but in what lay beyond it, His exaltation to the Father’s right hand and His completion of His redemptive work.

Hebrews 1:3-4 After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

The fullness of His joy was found in the presence of God, at the right hand of His Father. It was found in unhindered communion with His Father, a joy the Psalmist declared long before:

Psalm 16:11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

We are called to follow His example. As Jesus despised the shame and endured the cross by fixing His eyes on the joy set before Him, so we must look past our present affliction and suffering and fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ. Look ahead to your blessing in Christ Jesus. Look to your imperishable, incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading inheritance; an inheritance reserved in heaven for you. Look to the glory that is yet to be revealed. Look to the presence of God, where there is peace, assurance, and fullness of life. Look to the day when you shall see Christ and be like Him. Look to the day when every tear is wiped away, death is no more, and we enter forever into the joy of our Lord.

Our greatest days are yet to come. Full and final satisfaction, contentment, and joy are not found in this present age, but only in the presence of God Himself. There, we will stand before the Lord God, not in our own merit, nor clothed in our own righteousness, but covered in the perfect and blameless righteousness of Jesus Christ. There, we will behold Him face to face and dwell forever in the joy secured for us by our Savior.

There are far too many Christians who seek their joy and contentment in earthly things and earthly outcomes. This is folly and futility. There is nothing in this world that can fully meet the deepest

longings of the human heart but the Lord God Himself. Earthly things are fragile and fleeting, easily shaken, unable to last, and ultimately unable to fulfill what they promise. Though earthly things may boast great promises, those promises are empty and deliver nothing of lasting or eternal value. Therefore, as Scripture exhorts us:

Colossians 3:1-3 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This is why, like Jesus, we must look past our affliction and suffering to the glories that await. The reason we endure is not because our path is easy, but because the end is sure. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God, and one day we will appear with Him in glory. This is the settled hope and perspective that sustains us through the ups and downs of life. This is the same unshakable conviction that carried the apostle Paul through his suffering, as he testified:

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

In Romans, Paul declared the certainty of future glory. In the book of Corinthians, he explained the process by which God brings us there by showing that present affliction actually serves eternal purposes. He writes,

2 Corinthians 4:17-18 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Therefore, lift your eyes up from the mess and mire of this world. Look beyond the unseen, look beyond its passing delights, and look to the eternal, fix your eyes on Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, the risen and reigning King. Run the race set before you with endurance, knowing that the joy set before you is certain, eternal, and far greater than anything this world can offer. Endurance is learned by looking to Jesus, who submitted to the Father even when obedience was costly and painful. We must look to His obedience when it involved suffering, His trust in the Father when the path was dark, and His submission when the cost was personal and severe.

Lastly, we must fix our eyes on Jesus' endurance under great suffering and shame. Hebrews calls us not only to look to Jesus, but to the cross and consider how He endured it.

Hebrews 12:3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The term translated "consider" is the Greek verb *ἀναλογίζομαι* (*anal o gizomai*). It means to reckon, to weigh carefully, to calculate deliberately, and to reason something through thoroughly. This term is not a fleeting thought or a devotional emotion. It is an intentional, sustained, and analytical reflection. The object of our consideration is Jesus, "him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself." We are commanded to contemplate, meditate on, and fix our minds upon His endurance under hostility, comparing His suffering with our own, not to diminish our pain, but to rightly assess it. As we consider His faithfulness under rejection, injustice, and shame, our perspective will be adjusted.

Consider what Jesus endured from sinners: great hostility, hatred, humiliation, and crucifixion. He faced antagonistic words and violent deeds, false accusations and relentless abuse. He was rejected by His own people, betrayed by a close companion, abandoned by His closest disciples, openly mocked by the crowds, and condemned by the governing authorities. Yet consider His response to such hostility against Himself. He did not answer in kind. He did not answer cruelty with cruelty, or accusation with defense, or suffering with retaliation.

Isaiah 53:7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

His silence was not weakness, nor resignation, but willing obedience and submission. He could have appealed to Father, and summoned more than twelve legions of angels, but He chose restraint, entrusting Himself to the will, decree, and purpose of His Father. Jesus responded to hostility and violence with compassion and prayer. Even in the face of extreme cruelty and injustice, Jesus interceded for those who were actively putting Him to death.

Luke 23:33-34 And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. 34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And they cast lots to divide his garments

Their sinful actions did not harden His heart, nor did it embitter Him, or distract Him from His mission. Even as He suffered unjustly, His concern remained the will of God –the salvation of sinners. Jesus responded to hostility and violence by continuing His redemptive mission. The opposition of sinful men did not derail the purpose of redemption, but instead became the very means by which it was accomplished.

John 10:17-18 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

This voluntary surrender shows that Jesus was never a victim of man's wickedness, violence, or circumstance. He endured hostility and violence while actively entrusting Himself to the Father, who had sovereignly ordained His path. He entrusted Himself fully to the Father. Jesus placed His cause, His suffering, and His vindication entirely in the Lord God's righteous hands.

1 Peter 2:22-23 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

The command to "consider Him" calls us to carefully and thoughtfully contemplate His endurance under hostility and to learn from His response. Jesus was faithful, obedient, patient, and submissive. He entrusted Himself, and all of His circumstances, to Him who judges justly, His heavenly Father. As we consider Jesus in this way, our own difficulties, sufferings, and trials are placed in proper perspective, and our hearts are strengthened, and our courage is renewed. You must continually look and consider Jesus so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. These two commands are not a vague devotional suggestion, but deliberate and sustaining disciplines of the Christian life. Look to Jesus, consider Jesus, and weigh your own suffering and hostility against what Jesus endured on your behalf. Faithful Christians throughout the ages have recognized that endurance is found not by looking inward, but by fixing the eyes of the soul firmly upon Christ Jesus alone. J. C. Ryle expressed this truth with characteristic clarity when he wrote:

Look to anything of your own, and you will never feel comfortable. Your own life and doing; your own church going and sacrament receiving; your own Bible reading and your prayers; your own alms giving and your charities – what are they all but a huge mass of imperfection? Rest on nothing but Christ crucified, and the atonement He made for you on Calvary.

The Christian life is a demanding and grueling race, but it is not one we run alone, nor is it one we run blindly. We have been surrounded by faithful witnesses, warned of real hindrances, and called to endure, but above all, we have been commanded to fix our eyes on Jesus and consider His run. Jesus was not only an example of faith; He is its founder and its perfecter. He cut the path through suffering,

secured the finish through His triumph, and now leads His people forward with grace and strength. When the race grows hard, when weariness sets in, and when the temptation to look elsewhere arises, the remedy remains the same: look to Jesus. Look away from yourself, away from distractions, and away from despair, and fix the eyes of your soul upon Him.

As you leave this place and continue running the race set before you, keep your focus clear and singular. Look to Christ's past work on the cross, where your sins were fully paid and your peace with God was secured. Look to His present work in heaven, where He intercedes for you as your great High Priest, supplying mercy and grace in every moment of need. Look to His future return, when the race will finally give way to glory. The One who began your faith will finish it. The One who went before you will bring you home.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.
