

Hebrews 12:1-3
Run with Endurance

Introduction

Where were you on the morning of May 7, 1995? I was one of 59,000 runners crowded into downtown Spokane for the start of Bloomsday. I stood shoulder to shoulder with other racers – wondering how this was going to work. It was supposed to be a run. Since I'd always been more of a sprinter, I was a little nervous. Bloomsday is no marathon, but 7.46 miles requires some endurance. When the gun sounded, the crowd lurched forward. Soon I was running. Literally running – not jogging – dodging parking meters and people trying to get into open space. As I headed through Browne's Addition and downhill toward the Spokane river, I felt pretty good. But during the long, slow climb up Cemetery Hill, doubt set in. It helped that people lined the streets shouting encouragement. I tried to keep my focus on the finish line. But in the back of my mind, I was thinking about the hill. Doomsday Hill. A steep climb near the end of the race. A costumed vulture stands at the top of the hill as a symbol for how runners feel about the climb. As Doomsday Hill loomed, I wondered if I'd have enough endurance to run the race...

In today's passage the author uses the metaphor of running a race to speak of the Christian life. The main command in our passage is found at the end of verse 1, **“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”** Living by faith in Jesus is like running a race. It's not a sprint. It's not a medium-distance run. It's a marathon. The words for “run” and “race” both speak to difficulty, struggle, and conflict. It's not easy. Running the race of faith involves struggle, difficulty, and endurance. But it's worth it.

So, in Hebrews 12:1-3, the author urges us to run with endurance the race of faith.

This urgent call to run with endurance captures the main message of Hebrews. Because of suffering and difficulties, the original readers were tempted to give up faith in Jesus and go back to their old way of life. And so, the author writes: “don't throw away your faith in Jesus because only those who continue to believe will receive the promised reward.”

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It's a message for each of us. We too face suffering and difficulties. We too, may be tempted to throw away our faith in Jesus and go back to our old way of life. So, in chapter 12, the author gives an urgent call to "run the race of faith with endurance!" How? We're given two disciplines. If you want to run with endurance, you've got to *lay aside hindrances* and you've got to *look to Jesus*.

1. Lay aside hindrances.

The author begins by reminding us that many before us have run the race of faith. Look at verse 1.

Verse 1a: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."

The word, "therefore," points back to the examples of faith in chapter 11. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."

The "cloud" imagery emphasizes the large number. He's saying: "you are not alone. Many before you have run the race of faith in the midst of difficulties, doubts, and hostility. The word "surrounded" makes us think that this "great cloud of witnesses" are like my Bloomsday experience. People on either side of the course giving encouragement to the runners. The difference with these witnesses. They don't just say things like: "you can do it or keep going!" No. Their encouragement is this: "**Our God is trustworthy!**"

Since all these witnesses testify that our God is trustworthy, he continues,

Verse 1b: "let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely..."

How do we run with endurance? The first discipline is to "lay aside." We must "lay aside" anything that hinders our run. Just like a runner in the ancient world would throw off excess clothing or would train to get rid of excess body weight, in the race of faith we must lay aside every hindrance. Specifically, we **lay aside** every **weight**. And every **sin**.

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Weights aren't necessarily bad things. When I ran Bloomsday, I didn't run the race with snow boots, snow pants, and a heavy coat. Those aren't bad things. But they're not going to help me run. **Weights** are like that. They hinder our ability to run. It could be a relationship, entertainment, sports, politics, a habit, a hobby, even a mindset or attitude. **Weights** are different for different people. Something that is a **weight** for me may not be a **weight** for you. So be careful. Don't assume that your weight is everyone's weight.

I talked recently with a twenty-something single. He realized that his desire for marriage was hindering his run. A subtle attitude crept into his life. "I'll get serious about being a spiritual leader when I get married." To his credit, he recognized this weight and is laying it aside. He decided to run after Jesus, run after his career, run after relationships, and run after serving in the church. Now. That way, when God brings him a wife, he's already running the race.

What about you? What weight do you need to lay aside? What's hindering your run?

If we're going to run with endurance, we need to lay aside every weight. We also need to lay aside every **sin**. The **sin** "**which clings so closely.**" It's a great word picture. Sin is kind of like when you pull a sweater out of the dryer and a bunch of socks cling to it. Sin clings to us.

If you are a Christian, know that you will continue to battle with indwelling sin. Yes, the Holy Spirit breaks our enslavement to **sin**. But **sin** resists. It's like the static cling of a sock to a sweater. We're no longer enslaved to sin, but now we experience conflict with sin. **Sin** clings closely to every one of us.

And **sin** is a heavy burden that weighs us down. It's like running a race with a 100 lb. backpack. David describes the effects of his own sin: "**For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Psalm 32:3-4).**"

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Sin weighs us down and trips us up. So how do you lay aside sin? You lay aside sin through **repentance**. **Repentance** doesn't sound like a lot of fun. I think that's why it's so little practiced. But repentance results in blessing and joy. **Let me ask you a question. How do you respond when you sin?**

- **Do you run and hide from God?** I keep God at a distance until I feel better.
- **Do you excuse your sin?** I know its sin...but I'm under a lot of pressure...
- **Do you minimize your sin?** It's a slip up. It's not as bad as someone else.
- **Do you deny or ignore your sin?** I don't remember. I pretend it didn't happen.

I've tried all these. They're terrible strategies. We'll never run with endurance if we're weighed down by sin. We need to repent – to lay aside sin. David says this: **"I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin (Psalm 32:5)."** Repentance results in forgiveness which results in blessing. **"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity (Psalm 32:1-2a)."**

What does repentance look like? I've heard it this way. Repentance involves 3 steps. Confess. Affirm. Request. C-A-R. Confess. Confess to God. Use biblical categories. Not, "I was frustrated" but "I was sinfully angry." Affirm. Affirm that in Jesus Christ you have forgiveness. You confess your sin and believe that in Jesus Christ your sin is forgiven. Confess. Affirm. Request. Request grace for change. Ask the Holy Spirit to graciously change you. And believe that he will do it. Confess. Affirm. Request. That's repentance. That's how we lay aside sin.

Repentance results in forgiveness which results in blessing. It's a beautiful thing. You can experience the blessing of repentance right now. Is there unrepentant sin in your life? Pornography. Spouse abuse. Sexual immorality. Bitterness. Unforgiveness. Anger. Pride. Whatever it is, you can receive forgiveness by coming to God in honest repentance. Repentance is how you begin the Christian life. Repentance is how you continue in the Christian life. Every day. Repentance is how you run with endurance.

Here's some suggestions I heard that I've found helpful.

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1. **Repent of every sin.** When you sin, repent right away. Don't leave it. Deal with it right away.
2. **Repent every day.** Have a regular time each day when you think back on the last 24 hours. Repent of any known sin. Make this part of your daily Bible reading and prayer time.

So, every day this week spend time repenting of sin. Do that by asking four questions:

1. **What excuses am I making?** We hate the effects of sin but still love the sin.
2. **How can I flee temptation?** Not what can I get away with...
3. **How can I embrace God instead?** How does God offer more than sin?
4. **Who can help me?** Who can you ask to encourage you, challenge you, and hold you accountable?

If we're going to run with endurance, the first discipline is to lay aside every hindrance. Every weight. Every sin. Every day. When I ran Bloomsday, I ran in lightweight clothes with lightweight shoes. I didn't want anything hindering my ability to run. It's similar in our race of faith. There's a second discipline. Running with endurance requires we look to Jesus.

2. Look to Jesus

Verses 1b-2: "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."

Looking to Jesus means we deliberately look away from other things and focus on Jesus. It takes effort and intentionality because our default focus is self, circumstances, and others. We're given four ways we look to Jesus. Look to Jesus as founder, perfecter, runner, and finisher.

First, **look to Jesus as founder. The founder of faith.** Synonyms for "founder" include "author" and "originator." This means that Jesus established you in faith. Through the Holy Spirit you are given the gift of faith (Eph. 2:8-9).

I was recently at the Flour Mill. There's a Flour Mill sign that says, "Flour Mill Est. 1874." Established 1874. Jesus, as the founder of faith, establishes your faith. Jesus writes his own "Est." on you. Do you have faith in Jesus? That's supernatural! It's a

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gift. Sure, it's weak and wavering. But it's amazing you have faith at all. Instead of focusing on the strength or weakness of your faith, focus on Jesus, the one who gave you the gift of faith.

Second, **look to Jesus as perfecter. The perfecter of faith.** What he starts, he finishes. Paul says it this way: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6)." Jesus uses your struggles and your sin to grow you in humility, dependence, and love for Jesus. He's like a master craftsman. He establishes this gift of faith and continues to chisel, trim, and sand. So, the process is often painful. And here's another thing to consider. We tend to think that perfected faith should *feel* powerful. But faith that is being perfected often *feels* like *weakness, incompetence, and neediness*. If you feel weak and needy, that's Jesus perfecting your faith. He's finishing what he started in you.

We run with endurance by looking to Jesus, first, as founder, second, as perfecter.

Third, we look to **Jesus as runner**. Here's what's amazing! We have a God who took on flesh and ran the race of faith himself. So, we can learn from watching him run.

Verse 2a: "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..."

How was Jesus able to run with endurance? He focused on the finish line. The joy set before Jesus was (1) The future joy of "reunion" with his Father (Ps. 16:11). (2) The future joy of making us part of his joy. (3) The future joy of being crowned with honor and glory.

Jesus' focus on these future joys enabled him to "endure the cross." It's hard to imagine the physical pain of crucifixion. It was designed to maximize and prolong severe physical pain. But the spiritual pain was even greater. On the cross, Jesus, pure and sinless, became sin for us and experienced God's full fury against all human evil. And Jesus' focus on future joy enabled him to "despise the shame." Crucifixion

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was also designed to maximize shame. Imagine the humiliation of publicly hanging naked for hours or days? Yet Jesus' focus on future joy enabled him to "think little of the shame." Paul said it this way, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18)."

As I began the climb up Doomsday Hill, I was tired. My legs burned. I wondered, "would I make it?" Life can feel like running up Doomsday Hill. Maybe that's you this morning. Jesus knows what that feels like. He has compassion because he ran the race of faith. In verse 3, the author says, "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Look to Jesus so that you will not grow weary. He knows. He cares. He's near. He ran with endurance by focusing on the joy set before him. That's how we run with endurance too.

The problem is we're very earthbound. We've been trained by a multimillion-dollar industry to desire what can be had in this life. We need to develop our imagination about the new heavens and earth. Not that a renewed earth is imaginary. We just think so little about it. The Bible speaks of the joy set before us as a Great Wedding Feast. The menu is aged wine and fine meats. The invitation list includes guests from every nation. The location is Jerusalem. Jesus eagerly anticipates this reunion dinner with his bride. With you. At this feast, Jesus and his bride will drink the cup and break bread together for the first time. This is part of the future joy that enabled Jesus to run with endurance. It's the same for us. So, look to Jesus as runner.

But Jesus is not merely an example. A runner that we look to for inspiration. Jesus is one who finished the race for us. He enables those who, by faith, hold fast to him to reach the same goal. So, fourth, we run with endurance by **looking to Jesus as finisher.**

At the end of **verse 2** we see the results of Jesus' race of faith: He "is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

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Notice that Jesus is “seated.” The author of Hebrews reminds us repeatedly that the OT priests had to stand to perform their sacrifices. They could never sit down because their work of sacrifice was never done. But when Jesus offered the sacrifice of himself for our sins, he sat down. The point is that he sits down because his work of salvation is done. There is nothing more to do to save sinners. “It is finished,” Jesus said on the cross (John 19:30).

After three days God raised Jesus from the dead as a demonstration that he accepted Christ's suffering and death as full payment for sin. Jesus was then exalted to the Father's right hand. This demonstrates Jesus' favor and authority. This is the crown Jesus purchased through the cross. And through faith we are united to Jesus. In his humanity Jesus joins us to himself; in his divinity Jesus joins us to the holy God. I like how one pastor put it, “His [Jesus] right to come before God is your right to come before God. His location is your location. As long as Jesus is in heaven, our place there is guaranteed. As long as Jesus has the Father's approval, we have the Father's approval. As long as Jesus lives, our life is guaranteed. And Jesus lives forever!” Jesus says, “It is finished!” Run with endurance by resting in Jesus' finished work for you.

But resting is hard because we want to do something. We default to trying to win God's approval through our actions. We default to trying to prove to ourselves and others that we're good, we matter, we're enough. We want to be impressive. I struggle with this every day. It's like my heart says, “**Hey Jesus, thanks for what you did for me...now I need to go give a good sermon today so I can prove myself – so I can be impressive.**” So, we actively need to stop trying to prove ourselves. We need to hear Jesus' words, “It is finished!” over and over again.

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I've heard it said this way: we look to Jesus as finisher by "giv[ing] up our attempts to remove our guilt, establish our identity or prove ourselves. Instead we rest on his finished work."

Look to Jesus as finisher this week. Here's a suggestion I've heard that has helped me. Every time I'm tempted to impress others, I hear Jesus say to me, "it is finished!" That's what I want you to do this week. When you're tempted to impress others, hear Jesus say to you, "It is finished!"

Conclusion

Living by faith in Jesus is like running a race. It's not a sprint. It's not a medium-distance run. It's a marathon. It's not easy. Running the race of faith involves struggle, difficulty, and endurance. But it's worth it.

If we're going to run the race with endurance, we need to practice two disciplines. First, we lay aside hindrances. Lay aside every weight; every sin; every day. Second, we

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practice the discipline of looking to Jesus. We intentionally look away from self, circumstances, and others and look to Jesus as founder, as perfecter, as runner, and as finisher.

Even though it was hard, I made it up Doomsday Hill without stopping. I remember the thrill as I ran past City Hall and spotted the finish line for the first time. I finished in 54:53. Good for 1,436th place. My time and place really didn't matter. I had finished the race. That's all that really mattered. That's all that really matters in the race of faith. By laying aside hindrances and looking to Jesus we will finish the race set before us.