For the Joy

Preached Feb 18, 2024

Hebrews 12:1-3

Sermon Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/live/4zKWAiO2sG8?si=y3dJ115nSPTlLmd3

Sources at end of this doc.

Introduction

We are taking a one week break from our series through Romans to make some room for Tori to share what's happening at Not Forgotten.

This morning I'm going to preach to you from Hebrews 12:1-3.

I want to begin with a question.
Have you ever been tempted to give up on something that you know God has called you to do? Give up on your marriage, or a friendship. Give up on the Church. Or maybe right now you are being tempted to give up up on the Christian faith altogether?

The Christian life is a marathon. It requires a willingness to endure pain all the way through to the finish line. But how do we do that?

The book of Hebrews was written to people that were being tempted to no longer endure. People that had found life was as hard, or in many ways harder as a Christian, and persevering was proving difficult.

So let's explore our main text to see if we can find some answers.

READ Hebrews 12:1–3 (ESV)
1 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.

We endure in the faith for the joy of following Christ.

I. The Great Cloud

A. Immediately preceding these verses, we are told the story of several heroes of the faith throughout history. These are all people that suffered under great testing, and yet endured until the end.

B. Abraham, for example, believed God so totally that even though he never saw with his own eyes what God had promised him, He saw it with eyes of faith at a distance as though it was in his present. By faith, he took what God had promised in the future and pulled into the present. If God said it, then it was as good as done for Abraham.

C. In (**READ**) **11:33-38**, we are told of many believers *"who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."*

D. 11:13-16, 26 tells us that the thing that all of these predecessors of faith have in common is that they died **not** having seen the fullness of what God had promised them. They all ***looked ahead*** to what God had promised, trusting that it was as good as done, and that it would make their endurance small in comparison.

This "great cloud of witnesses" is this list of people that believed God. We could also, by implication, infer that the "great cloud" includes other people throughout church history that believed God in a similar way.

Witnesses testify. These witnesses testify that the joy of the reward that is coming makes the endurance of this present pain more than worth it.

II. The Race of Endurance

A. The author of Hebrews is giving us a helpful metaphor. We are in a foot race in a coliseum. All around us is a crowd of spectator-witnesses who are the heroes of the faith that ran their race successfully in the past. They are cheering you on.

B. **This race is not casual. Running is painful and takes great effort. It is not a matter of winning so much as finishing the race itself.**

C. In this metaphor is an acknowledgement that this race takes great effort. The Christian life is not one of passive waiting for the end. Following Jesus is a strenuous activity, full of blood, sweat, and tears.

D. But it is a worthy effort, that all of the Church bear's witness to, and cheers for, as each believer runs and the eventually crosses their finish line through death and into eternal life

E. The primary command of this text is **"Run your race with endurance."**

ILLUSTRATION:
John Stephen Akhwari was a marathon runner in Tanzania who regularly finished marathons in under 2.5 hours. He didn't have much trouble qualifying for the 1968 Olympics. The problem was that the 1968 Olympics were being held in Mexico City, which is much higher in altitude than his home in Africa.

Right out of the gate, he struggled because this was a situation he had never encountered before.

His legs started cramping up uncontrollably. He couldn't breathe, but he kept going. Then he got tangled up with some other runners, fell, and dislocated his knee, scraped up his leg, and injured his shoulder.

But he kept running.

He eventually finished, at night, after most of the crowd had gone home. He was dead last, almost an hour after the winner.

In an interview later on, a reporter asked, "Why didn't you quit when you were hurt and bruised, bloody, discouraged? Why didn't you quit?" His answer: "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."

This is what the Christian life looks like. It is not smooth and free like a gazelle leaping across the fields into the open arms of Jesus.

No, it's a race full of moments of graceful speed, and others of cramping legs, lost stamina, falling down, colliding with other runners, dislocations and injuries, and sometimes even loneliness.

Maybe you imagine that everyone else is living their life like a gazelle leaping effortlessley across the African plains, without a care in the world. But I can assure you that no one is. No one's race is without tremendous obstacles and effort.

Everyone in this room is broken. Everyone has issues. Everyone is running with a limp.

For Akwari, it was his countrymen that sent him that helped him endure. And this is what this great cloud of witnesses does for us.

Not only the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, but the cloud of living witnesses in this room that are running with you.

Witnesses testify. What are these witnesses testifying to?

They are testifying to the fact that they endured, and because they believed God and endured, they received what God promised. And the reward of receiving what God promised made all the pain of the endurance worth it.

III. The Encumbrance

A. **How can we run with endurance? Begin by throwing off the encumbrance of everything that gets in the way, or slows you down, from pursuing Jesus. Every love, every activity, every desire, every distraction, every sin.**

B. **We can draw a careful distinction between "weight" and "sin".** *Not every weight is a sin, but every sin is a weight. Both need to be cast aside.*

Some things in your life are not so much sin as they are things you do that get in the way of a more fruitful life with Jesus in the service of His kingdom.

But other things are clearly marked out as sin. They are the worst kind of weight.

Both weight and sin need to be cast off for the sake of your endurance.

ILLUSTRATION:
As a young man, I went to a school that required pants as part of the dress code. This meant jeans every day.

I often forgot my gym clothes, and so I would have to go through gym class with jeans on. In the summer, this was miserable. My legs would sweat into my jeans, which would get heavy and sticky on my legs. I'm already not the fastest person on the basketball court, and I don't shoot the ball well either, so having 10 pounds of sweaty denim velcro'd to my legs made playing basketball nearly impossible (I needed every advantage I could get.

Weight and Sin saps your strength, decreasing your endurance, and consequently threatens the finish line.

Weight (not sin):

- The amount of attention you give to your phone, your career, your bank account, your home, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, hobbies, etc. might be an impediment to your life with Jesus.
- Or, you lack of attention to financial stability, your family, your spouse, your friends, your church, etc. might be an impediment.

It's helpful to look at your life not through the lens of sin/not sin, but through the lens of weight/not weight.

Sin-Weight:

- Sins of commission (doing things that God forbids)
- Sins of omission (failing to do things that God commands)

Before we began following Christ, sin was something embedded in us that we could not shake. Sin is what defined your identity. But once you are in Christ, sin is no longer who you are. It is a set of heavy clothing that you can throw off.

Sin is always embedded in a lie. The lie says, "Put this on, it will make you feel better. You will run faster, with more freedom. But then you put it on, and all it does is slow you down and make you miserable. Recognizing the lie behind the sin is essential to throwing it off.

The race of the Christian life has infinitely higher stakes than a real foot race, but we would never imagine trying to run a 5k in wet jeans.

Then why do we attempt to follow Christ with the "weighty impediments and sin" on our shoulders? There is no need to carry these things that drain our joy and compromise your faith. You don't have to carry these things. Jesus has made a way for you.

IV. Looking Ahead

A. **But we are not left wondering how to throw off this sticky impediment to our faith.** *Verse 2 points us forward to someone that was conspicuously missing from the list of heroes in chapter 11.*

READ Verse 2 again:
[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.

B. **What does it mean "founder and perfecter"?**

Jesus is the originator of our faith, and He is the one who completes it in us.

To put this inside the race metaphor, *Jesus not only ran **HIS**race, He has run **OUR** race.* We are indeed running, but He has determined that despite the pain of running (and because of the pain of running) we will finish.

So, we run the race looking forward to the finish line, which is Jesus Himself.

1.- We get to be with Jesus, and
2.- we get to be like Jesus.

C. **A runner can't run well without focussing on the finish line.** Jesus Himself ran this race. He has been across the same ground that you are running (as you), only long before you began your race. In fact, He made a way for you to endure to the finish line.

D. **Jesus ran for joy, we run for joy. Jesus' joy is in glorifying the Father, and redeeming us.** Our joy is in glorifying the Father, by being the recipients of redemption.

In the same way that Jesus looked forward to His glorification with the Father, we look forward to Christ. We follow Him through the pain and shame of this life, into future glory with Christ.

He is both the reason we run, and the destination of our running.

Conclusion

Jesus is seated now at the right hand of the Father, in the place of honor. Ephesians 2:6 says that we are seated with Him in heavenly places.

This is the race we are running. If you are in Christ, then your race has already been run ahead of you. You are seated, and will be seated, with Him in the winner's circle.

This goal is what motivates us to throw weight and sin off onto Christ. Disentangle yourself this morning by coming to Him, once again, in worship and lay your encumbrances at His feet. Confess your sin to Him, receive His forgiveness, and allow the Holy Spirit to pick through your life and throw out the sweaty jeans and encumbrances you carry.

I want to join in with the cloud of witnesses this morning and bear witness to you. Whatever your race is like right now, cruising like a gazelle or wheezing and falling like John Akwhari in Mexico City for the first time, set your eyes on the finish line, Jesus Himself. He is the originator of your faith, and He is the One that will bring you to the finish. You didn't come all this way to quit. Jesus brought you here to finish the race.

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