

Jesus - Founder & Perfecter of our Faith

~ Hebrews 12:1-2

Riley Newton

June 27, 2021

Many years ago here at Sturgeon Valley, I was on Brian Siewert's worship team. He was a great leader to me then while we played together, and still a great mentor/leader to this day. When we were planning and putting together our services in the middle of his tenure, I remember him coming up with a fresh idea in the Fall that some of you may remember. It stems from a well-known Biblical practice that his men's group had begun to undertake, and it is the practice of memorizing Scripture.

Brian's plan was to get the entire congregation to try and memorize Hebrews Chapter 12. He needed each of the worship leaders at the time to do their part, and each week go through the previous verse of memorization, and then introduce a new verse as well.

This was really, really hard. I remember going through Romans 5 in the Men's Morning Manna Study two years ago, and I made it to verse 6 but couldn't seem to get past that point without a lot of effort. It took a lot of mental stimulation, creating mnemonics (those physical cues to help you remember things), to get even to verse 7 or 8. As a church, we were trying to do that each week with Hebrews 12; I applaud that we even attempted doing that.

I don't remember how far we got along in Hebrews 12. I know it was probably around verse 5 or 6 again. What I still find crucial about that exercise that many of us undertook, and many do in our own devotions at home with the Lord, is that it sinks the Scripture deep into our subconscious. It bathes us in the Word of God; we swirl His Word around in our heads and take it with us wherever we go.

While it won't be possible today to spend time memorizing this Scripture, I challenge those here today, or listening online, to read these two verses and try memorize them. Read over the first verse, again and again, close your Bible and try saying it out loud, and then do it with verse 2. The reason I think you will benefit greatly from this memorization is that these two verses, Verses 1 and 2, of Hebrews 12, are the Gospel and Promise of Christ, condensed down into a digestible tract that we can understand and use as we live, every day. In fact, I am confident that if someone were to ask you to give a short summary of the Christian life in two sentences, this would be *the* passage to read or recite to them.

So let's read these important verses together, open your Bibles to this passage; Hebrews 12:1-2, if you have it available on your device, turn that YouVersion app, close kijiji, stop looking at RVs and Quads..., shut down Facebook marketplace, you can do that later. Okay, Here we go.

"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.”

Now that is a life well lived. Reminding us of the giants who came before us, throwing off all our sin, running the race set out before us, looking ahead to Jesus who ran it before us so that we could meet with Him. Well that’s your sermon, catch you next week. Kidding.

If you don’t know this next fact I’m about to mention, you will appreciate it immensely as it assists your Bible reading and learning. A lot of times in the Bible, the Chapters (which were created much later than the actual Scriptures themselves), are unhelpful to the full context of a passage. The transition between Hebrews 11 and Hebrews 12 is definitely one of these times. Just look at how this passage begins; it uses the word therefore.

Therefore what? Therefore is a coordinating conjunction. It connects two clauses together. So what happened just before this? This is what I meant when I said that chapter divisions can sometimes be unhelpful. They CAN be helpful when they aid us in finding a spot in the Word quickly, like we all just did together. Without them, it would take forever for us to all begin reading this passage together. HOWEVER (see that’s another connecting word), they also separate ideas that are often a continuation and an extension of another idea.

Whenever you see a “therefore” or a “however” in the Word of God, it means that whatever you’re about to read actually is the result of whatever comes directly before it. Because of this, I’m going to steal a little from Curtis (sorry, brother). We have to actually flip back our Bibles to Hebrews Chapter 11. I have no problem borrowing a couple verses from Curtis, 1) because we all need to understand where the author is coming from when he gives us this information, and 2) because Pastor Tom saddled me with two verses, and that’s really hard to dig into when the digging happens before, and after, your passage. So let’s flip back one page, or just zoom back to chapter 11 if it’s on the same page. We’re starting near the end of Chapter 11, verse 32. It says;

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— **33** who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, **34** 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. **35** Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. **36** Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. **37** They were stoned, they were sawn in two,^[a] they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— **38** of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.**39** And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, **40** since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. **HE. 12:1-2;** **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.

Now this makes a lot more sense, doesn't it. It shows us who this "great cloud of witnesses" really was, why they were such a "great cloud" in the first place, and in light of their enduring faith, even unto death such as martyrdom. If there have been greats in our past who could face such challenges, with such love and strength in the Lord Almighty, how much more can we, who live in such a blessed time and place, also follow in their footsteps? What great news.

After reflecting on this passage, it became apparent to me that there were three main themes that I believe should be well understood from these two verses of Scripture. Three main questions that need to be asked following reading this Scripture, and we're going to work through the questions together with the answers.

So here is question one. The author tells us to lay aside every sin in our lives.

1) So how do we lay aside every sin in our lives, realizing the fact that it's a lifelong struggle?

No delay on the answer for question one. *We acknowledge that there have been many who have gone before us, living their utmost for God, still making monumental mistakes, yet they did not give up the race of their faith but persisted until the end.*

The author speaks of this "great cloud of witnesses" as stalwarts; heroes of the faith, who placed their utmost and total reliance on God through their lives. These men are our forebears, who are now long gone yet are sealed in the Scriptures as living examples of a life of continual faith.

So how did they lay aside every sin in their lives? Total confession to God, repentance and seeking forgiveness. These heroes of our faith repented, made grave mistakes that are recorded forever as examples, and yet they still went back to repentance. Take our beloved King David, as a prime example of this reality. David was a man after God's own heart. The Lord said that about David; "[...] The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people [...]" (1 Sam 13:14). Yet the story of his adultery with Bathsheba is one of the most well known stories in Biblical history. Leonard Cohen's famous song "Hallelujah" references this story as its focal piece.

Samson was the strongest man on earth at one time, and yet he was foolish enough to let his guard down and allow God's blessing to be removed from him because of a sinful woman. He had many chances to wise up, and see that there was manipulation involved but Delilah was persistent in her sin, and drove Samson to sin himself. God removed His hand from Samson, and Samson realized the error of his way after being taken prisoner.

But what is similar in these two stories?

Firstly, that these great leaders had great strumbblings. **But** they kept running the race. Gideon did not give up when he thought Israel's victory would be thwarted, and surely outnumbered. Samson tore down the pillars one final time upon the heads of his enemies. David lost his son, and yet continued to lament and turn his face back to God Almighty, eventually becoming the greatest king amongst kings in all of Israel, lest Christ Almighty.

This "great cloud of witnesses" are not just people in the stands, cheering us on because they're dead, and are free of this mortal coil. They stand as reminders to us believers. The author uses the plural "we" here in this passage in order to draw his community of faith of the Hebrews to recognize themselves as part of the great cloud, called to live by faith. And at the same time, he is calling us 2000 years later to the same reality. In fact, we are witness to the Christian Community of God's faithfulness and to the effectiveness of a living faith. The author is using these previous giants as examples to exhort the current Christian's not to lose heart in their battles against sinfulness.

It is a wonderful and terrifying thought that such devoted lovers of the Lord could fall so far from His grace; yet they were not entirely forsaken. There was repentance, there was restoration and relationship.

We acknowledge sin, but we strive to live against its wishes for us. And we read the Bible! We read the Bible, seeing examples of living faith from thousands of years ago. We read the Bible, and we are encouraged to fight the good fight. To not let our guards down. To put our faith in God, and follow through with His call on our life.

The author uses the beautiful analogy of a long athletic marathon; a race, which at that time was commonly done in a large amphitheatre amongst a crowd of cheering spectators. This section is actually why some attribute the work of Hebrews to Paul, or under the guidance of Paul, as in his other writings, Paul frequently uses the imagery of self-disciplined athleticism. Paul's famous words here; "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Tim 4:6) rings very well with this Scripture.

It's a race, and we are all together on this road as brothers and sisters. So what other questions need to be asked then? We know we're throwing off sin, we know we're running this race, but who are we focusing on?

2) What did Jesus do for us so that we could live this life, and why do I care?

Here's what, and why. *Jesus Christ went to His imminent death, facing a terrible torturous one on a cross, despising the shame and reproach which he was forced to bare, and rising in new life to be seated at the right hand of God Almighty on high. And He did this for you, so that you could live in an everlasting relationship with Him, destroying the borders of death in your life. Amen.*

There's a rich meaning here which can be missed if not read in the Greek. The word founder in the ESV is not quite right for this spot. The passage says Jesus is the "Founder" and "Perfecter"

of our faith, but more correctly is the “inaugurator” and “maturer” of our faith. He is the champion, forerunner, initiator; the leader. This word, *archegon*, was used in Chapter 2:10 earlier in Hebrews in the context of Christ’s bringing of salvation. He is the one who ran the race first. He inaugurated the first Christian race. He laid the asphalt for the rest of us.

Jesus “scorned” the shame of the cross. That word here for scorned in Greek, *kataphroneo*, means that He counted it as little or nothing. He considered it “insignificant” in light of the goal that was to be accomplished; the race that He was running. Christ was given over to the lowest, dirtiest, most humiliating form of public execution reserved for criminals and slaves, and He was totally scorned by it. Yet as He was being scorned, counted as nothing on the cross, He counted the cross as nothing. He scorned the cross. He counted His death as insignificant in light of His calling. Do you see the irony here? Everyone around Him thought His death meant nothing, and He was scorned. Yet, He was scorning His own death because it was insignificant! The difference was in what the watchers believed the outcome to be, and what Christ knew the outcome would be. They thought this was the end of a nutbar heretics life, when in reality it was the accomplishment of salvation available to all humanity.

The hard pill to swallow here is that no amount of race-running could save us. We must accept the truth; only Christ could die for us. No one else. No one else was sinless. No one else in the “cloud of witnesses” had that going for them. Only Jesus ran the perfect race.

So that’s who were following in this race.

My third question is this;

3) How do we move on in our race, living fruitfully for God?

We completely submit our lives to unending focus on Christ, who will run this race with us through every trial and temptation; all of which He faced, Himself, during His life.

In the famous 1678 novel, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan analogizes sin as this weight that everyone carries on their back. Some don’t know even know they’re carrying the weight. It cannot be removed by any other means than the loving hands of God. Christian has to run up to the cross in order for the weight to be removed from his back. He says this; “He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death.” We can try every other way we want to rid ourselves of the sin that so ensnares us, but only turning to God removes that weight.

I feel like Bunyan must have had this image from Hebrews verse 1 and 2 here in his mind. There is a race that is being run; the race is life. In that race, we are being told by the author of Hebrews to throw off every “hindrance”, is the word used here; in Greek, it is said *ogkon*. *Ogkon* means a heaviness, a mass, a weight, even body fat in some circumstances actually. We have to trim off the body fat that keeps us down. We deliberately work out and shed that body fat as we work along the marathon race that is life, and we strive to get rid of that mass on us.

What beautiful imagery. Not only do we have the examples of the faithful kings, prophets, the legends, who have run the marathon before us and completed it; we know that there is One who ran the race perfectly. One who hit every mile marker in His Father's perfect time. One who runs as the example for not only ourselves, but for everyone of the other examples mentioned by the Author in Chapter 11.

Running a marathon is certainly one of the most physically and mentally exhausting exercises that a person can compete in; it's why there are entrance requirements for these things; people have died attempting to run them.

When a person accepts Christ, they accept the challenge of a marathon. They accept the race, that for some even in our modern age, costs them their lives soon after it's start. Eventually we will finish the race with our own lives as payment. Every new believer starts the marathon. They probably feel overwhelmed that this race is going to last decades. Either that, or much like how I felt when I came to know Christ, the race is kinda sold more like a hundred metre dash than a 40 kilometre stint. Our assurance is that regardless of how we felt beginning the race, we know how it will end. We already know our destination in the race. We can see Christ, we can follow Him who was the perfect example of a sinless runner. We have another hope too.

The difference between the prophets and kings of old mentioned by our author, and Jesus, is that Jesus is actively involved in our race, right now. If you're a Christian, if you have accepted Him, He is running with you. He is there in every valley and every mountain. He knows all about the pitfalls, because he's experienced them Himself. He knows about the cratered pothole at mile 6. He knows about the lustful temptations that lie at mile 9. He knows about the prideful lies that thrive at mile 14 and catch many of us. He knows about the greed that comes further down the line at mile 19. He knows about every snare, at every spot all the way up to the end of the 26th mile. He offers us an exit, throughout it all.

"1 Cor. 10:13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

God is able to deliver you from those snares. He is able to remove those weights that will continue to accumulate, if you would ask Him to deal with you. If you would invite Him to remove that excess body fat, and if you would run to lose that weight.

There's a common term used in marathon running called, "The Wall." You may have heard it before. It's when you're running a marathon, and it happens right around 20th mile, your whole body gives up the goat. All your glycogen stores, which you've been burning throughout the previous twenty miles have run out. You're running "on fumes." It takes an enormous amount of mental fortitude and physical will to bypass "The Wall." You have to push past it if you want to keep running the race. If you want to finish with a decent time, you cannot let the wall slow you down for long.

Most people will automatically start jogging, then slowing down to a walk. Some vomit. It's exhausting me even talking about this analogy. The best runners will push through. The wall is our sin. The wall is that sin in your life, that heavy weight which so ensnared you before, and you've thrown it off. You're running the race of life, Christ is in your sights, but then, it catches you again. Suddenly it sandbags your entire run. You stop running. You slow down. You feel totally defeated, and the worst part about "the Wall" is that it happens near the end of the race.

The third question really applies here; **how do we move on in our race, living fruitfully for God?**

We have to keep our eyes on Christ. You have to go back to the Scriptures to read what He is speaking to you. God speaks to people in many different ways, but one way He always speaks to us directly is through the careful reading of the Bible. Studying, praying, fasting, researching, learning, the Bible

You get back up. You stand up after you hit that wall. You face the finish line once again, you read the Scriptures telling of the stories of the heroes of our faith; their perseverance, their love for God despite circumstances, and their deaths for God, and you start running. You break through that wall.

All of us have been sandbagged by sinfulness which has taken our eyes off of Christ. Some of us are suffering acutely with addictions, or addictions which we've overcome but still fight against. We're taking up that fight. We're running this race together, as brothers and sisters.

Let's review what we've learned today.

1) So how do we lay aside every sin in our lives, realizing the fact that it's a lifelong struggle?

We acknowledge that there have been many who have gone before us, living their utmost for God, still making monumental mistakes, yet they did not give up the race of their faith but persisted until the end. They ran through the wall. They kept going.

2) What did Jesus do for us so that we could live this life, and why do I care?

Jesus Christ went to His imminent death, facing a terrible torturous one on a cross, despising the shame and reproach which he was forced to bare, and rising in new life to be seated at the right hand of God Almighty on high. And He did this for you, so that you could live in an everlasting relationship with Him, destroying the borders of death in your life.

3) How do we move on in our race, living fruitfully for God?

We completely submit our lives to unending focus on Christ, who will run this race with us through every trial and temptation; all of which He faced, Himself, during His life.

Brothers and sisters, today is a new day. June 27, 2021. Seize it for Christ. If you haven't accepted this race, it will be the greatest challenge and yet the greatest reward you'll ever receive. If you're on it and running well, watch out for those pitfalls, and help others who've fallen. If you're at the wall, stand back up. Start your feet. Run to the finish.

Let's pray together

-Thank you for this race. Thank you for the challenges in the race because they make us stronger. Thank you that You are here with us through everything, and you're our example.

-Pray for open hearts to receive the truth

-Pray for peace for everyone as we go out.