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Are We There Yet?

Hebrews 12:1-3

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It's summer vacation season and many of us have gone, are gone, or will be gone off on some grand adventure together. I am reminded of a time when I was a kid and my family decided to take the ultimate family vacation. The year was 1976 and I was nine years old when my dad announced the big news. We were taking a family road trip to Disneyland, and we were bringing both sets of grandparents with us. Seriously? Four of the "funnest" people that I knew, along with the five of us all headed to the greatest place on earth? And not only were we going to Disneyland, we were going to Disneyland to celebrate the Fourth of July in 1976, the 200th anniversary of America—the bicentennial Fourth of July at the happiest place on earth, with some of my favorite people on earth? This was going to be *amazing*! In preparation for the trip, my dad even went out and bought a brand-spanking-new station wagon—and not just any station wagon—this was the coolest station wagon ever. I mean Chevy Chase's Wagon Queen Family Truckster had nothing on this bad boy. The thing even had three rows of seats, unheard of at that time! And that third row, in the way, way back, that one was all mine. You see we weren't just taking the new station; we were taking two station wagons! One for the men, and one for the women, and I as the youngest one on that trip, got to have that third row all to myself. Yeah, this was gonna be a great trip! So we loaded up; we headed out, filled with joy and excitement and anticipation! We left our home in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, to "See the USA in our Chevrolet." And then, literally forty-five minutes from our driveway, we were just coming near LaGrange, Wyoming, and we came up to the top of a hill, and just as we came over the crest of that hill...*Boom!*...The car was careening across the road and we couldn't see a thing because the windshield was literally, completely covered with blood and guts. The biggest sheep you had ever seen had somehow escaped from the pasture and was standing literally in the middle of the road, just over the crest of that hill. We didn't have a chance. Neither did the sheep. (*laughter*) I don't think my dad even had time to hit the brakes. We just hit that sheep square on at full speed—and in an instant my dream world, my dream vacation, was shattered! As a nine-year-old boy, I had never seen blood and guts like that. Come to think of it, at fifty-one I don't think I've seen anything like it since—and I was traumatized! (*laughter*) I just sat there in the way, way back, crying for a thousand reasons I couldn't even fully understand, but mostly just thinking our dream vacation was over before it even began. But it wasn't. We somehow managed to limp into Cheyenne, Wyoming, where a mechanic replaced our radiator and banged out the front end enough so that the car would run, and we headed out, hoping the dream was still intact, even though our new station wagon certainly wasn't. In fact we didn't realize how bad it was until we began to run the air-conditioner. Every time we did, throughout that trip we were greeted with the overwhelmingly putrid smell of decaying sheep guts. (*laughter*) Great stuff! But wait. There's more!

That was the day and age of the CB radio and we were super excited about that as well. My mom and dad both had official CB names and they knew the "10-4 Good Buddy" lingo, just like a trucker. So this was great...right up until it wasn't...because somewhere in Utah my parents got into a huge argument on the CB radios while we all listened, in both cars! And then it got so bad they stopped talking all together...for two states! (*laughter*) I will never forget stopping for gas somewhere in the middle of nowhere in Nevada. It was a million miserable degrees outside, made all the worse by the temperature in our family being as cold as ice. While we all stood there

awkwardly waiting for the cars to fill up, no one said a word—and by this point the dream was gone. Somehow this amazing journey just wasn't turning out at all like I thought it would. I was disappointed and disillusioned. I really just wanted to give up and go home. It's kind of like how the journey of the Christian life has been for me, sometimes. If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn with me to Hebrews, Chapter 12? While Bryan is overseas teaching in a conference for many of our missionaries, we'll take a break from Proverbs, and today I want to share some new lessons that I'm learning from an old favorite passage. Hebrews 12, beginning in verse 1:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (*NASB, Hebrews 12:1-3)

In the mid 1980's I began attending Lincoln Berean, and I began hearing the Bible taught for the first time in my life. As a new believer, this passage helped me understand that to run the race for Christ meant I needed to get rid of some junk in my life ...**since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us.** Having not grown up as a Christian, I was beginning to understand how sin had made a tangled mess of my life, and I began to see that if I wanted a different life—the Christian life—I needed to throw some stuff off. Still to this day this verse reminds me that if we want to run well the race that Christ has marked out for us, and if we are to endure in doing so, we have got to avoid entanglement in sin. The imagery is so powerful.

Imagine a runner getting ready to run a marathon but standing with his or her feet wrapped in rows and rows of barbed wire. As they begin to run, with each passing step the coil twists tighter; the barbs dig deeper, and the blood begins to flow. No runner would be so foolish. It is painfully obvious that it just wouldn't work, and yet so often, we as believers convince ourselves that we can run the race for Christ and indulge our desires for sin. We end up hurting and bleeding, entangled and injured from experiencing the life that Christ has for us. Just as it did when I was a new believer, this passage continues to remind me that to run this race well requires throwing off **the sin which so easily entangles.** But that's not all that verse teaches. It speaks also of **laying aside every encumbrance,** every weight that slows us down. What does that mean? What are some of the weights that slow us as we seek to run for Christ? For some it may be seemingly unanswered prayers or unanswered questions. It could be the pursuit of another love, or a lost one. It could be criticism or opposition. Today we face a great threat from discouragement, as we live in a culture that has become so increasingly hostile to biblical Christianity. Almost every single day we are now barraged with discouraging news in our very own country, the country that has now rejected so much of what we believe in! That reality alone could cause many of us to slow or even stop running for Jesus. But over the past couple of years, there is another struggle that God has been speaking to me about.

One of the greatest hindrances on the race for me, and I believe for many of us, is pain—and it makes sense. After all, what causes a marathon runner to stop running in the twenty-first mile? Overwhelming pain! When I started out running this race for Christ, when I gave my life to Jesus, determined to run the race toward Him and for Him for all of my days, I had absolutely no idea how

painful it would be. Both personally and professionally the road has been marked by pain. I had no idea how much pain I would face in my own journey, and it is nothing compared to the pain and suffering that I hear about and see almost every day as a pastor. This church is filled with beautiful people who have faced suffering like they never could have imagined, people who have had to walk through pain that is deeper and darker than a nightmare. And it hurts...and it just keeps coming! Life in this fallen world is filled with pain—broken relationships, wounds from those most trusted, unexpected illness, disease, broken hopes and dreams, lost jobs, lost friends, lost kids—sometimes even the shocking loss of a loved one to unexpected death. But by the way, it's not just the Christian life that's filled with pain. It's simply life! I think all of us who are over fifty would acknowledge that life has been far more painful than we could ever have imagined when we were under twenty-five. Sometimes it makes you want to just give up, to say, "Forget it; I quit!" And countless believers do, in one way or another. After decades of seeking to run this race for Christ, I believe that pain and suffering are among the greatest hindrances we face. They weigh us down; they slow us down; sometimes they even completely sit us down. The pain and suffering are hindrances that we must lay aside if we are to finish our race for Christ—which of course is easier said than done—which is why the Scriptures say we are to **lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.** This race is not a sprint. It's not a walk in the park. It's not a fun run. It's a marathon. For some it is the Ironman Triathlon. It simply is not easy. It can even be grueling. No matter what strategy you use to try to evade it, the pain is going to come, and if we are to finish well then we must **run with endurance.** And maybe, maybe we need to stop trying to run around the pain and instead learn how to run through it.

At least that is what the Lord has been trying to teach me. For me personally, the Lord is showing me that pain, or more specifically my aversion to it, represents one of the greatest threats to my race for Christ—because I hate it! I hate the pain and the suffering in this life—and I'll want to escape it, seeking the quiet peaceful spot on the sidelines. But this past year the Lord has been challenging me to embrace it, to stop seeking to live a pain-free life, and instead recognize and own that it is simply part of life, and to trust Him to meet me in it—to give me His enabling and sustaining grace, that I might find joy in persevering in this race for Him even in the pain! That requires facing the reality about this life. **Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**—the race that is marked out for us by Him!

When I first encountered Hebrews 12, I was ready to run. I was all in as a new believer; I was armed and dangerous! With verses like John 10:10 and passages like Romans 8, I was ready to move out as a conqueror, sprinting towards the abundant life that I had been promised. The problem was that my vision of the race was more fantasy than reality and likely more derived from a happily-ever-after fairy tale than a true understanding of Scripture. In fact as a new Christian, I was completely unconvinced that heaven was even real—and I didn't even care! I literally thought life with God was going to be so great that if heaven did exist, well that would just be a bonus at the end. Boy was I mistaken—on both counts!

Today I will tell you that the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 ring as true to me as anything that has ever been uttered. He said, *"If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. And if the dead in Christ are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. If there's no resurrection, let's live it up now. Let's do everything we can to make this life as happy as it can possibly be."* And the truth is that even as believers, that is often how many of us do live. Perhaps the reason we experience so much frustration and disappointment in the Christian life is because we're not actually running *toward* Christ.

Let me ask you a question. In the past week, who or what did you live for? I mean honestly? If I looked at your calendar and I saw how you used your time, or I looked through your financial statements and saw how you spent your money, or more importantly, if I could somehow look into your heart this past week, month or year, who or what you truly loved and lived for, what would I find? Well, if you were to do that with me, you would find that far too often the race I am actually running was the self-life. The ultimate goal of the self-life is my happiness and the course is marked out accordingly, based on what I think will get me there—whatever it is that I can do to give me the best chance of having a happy life. But it just does not work. Over the years we have shared countless testimonies of people who thought that they could make that work. No matter what we try: popularity, success, fame, money, cars, shopping, women, men, diversions, escapes, vacations—whatever—the self-life never ultimately satisfies.

One of the most honest testimonies I ever heard was one we shared more than twelve years ago from a man named Pat. He shared how his life was empty, no matter what he tried, and then with a smile on his face, he made this shocking statement. Pat said, “My life was miserable until I found alcohol—and alcohol was beautiful!” What Pat meant was that alcohol worked in giving him an escape from his misery and his pain. When he felt bad, he just got drunk and it made him happy—for the moment. But he went on to share how, like all sin that went down as smooth as honey, ended as bitter as gall—and the escape he thought he found from the pain, ended up being the very knife that cut him even deeper. That is the reality of the self-life.

None of our efforts to chase happiness ever ultimately worked because when we do, we are running the wrong race—not the race He has marked out for us. It’s only when we run the race that He has marked out, that we can actually find true life, even though that road is inescapably marked by pain. So how do we know if we’re on the right path? It’s pretty simple. We just need to honestly ask ourselves who are we focused on? For most people, as they run the race of their life, their vision is firmly fixed on one person, and it can easily be represented by one thing: a mirror! Most people move through this life with their eyes fixed on themselves, running as hard and as fast as they can toward whatever they believe will make their life better. They don’t really get anywhere because they just keep running into themselves. The reality is that even as followers of Christ, it is so easy for us to get our eyes on the wrong target and our lives on the wrong path. **Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** It is Jesus who made us; it is Jesus who saves us! It is Jesus who can sustain us, and it is Jesus who awaits us. Jesus is **the author and perfecter of faith**, and it is by faith, not by sight, that we are called to live because the dead in Christ are raised, because heaven is real, because this world is fallen and broken and it is not our true home. We are literally headed toward all our hearts have ever desired—but we are not there yet.

Sometimes this life can feel like a gas station in the middle of a boiling hot desert, where we can’t even get along with those we love the most. It makes us want to quit, to just say, “Forget the whole thing,” but oh, what a mistake that would be! In 1976 we didn’t turn back. My parents made up. Eventually the smell of sheep guts lessened...a bit. But most importantly, we made it to Disneyland, and it was wonderful! Forty-two years later I can still immediately recall the feeling I had just being there. It was magical, just like they created it to be, and it was literally one of the happiest memories of my entire childhood. Truly, the joy of the destination was worth the great pain in the journey—and that is just Disneyland. What God has in store for us will make whatever Walt could come up with seem like a slum, so instead of spending everyday feverishly and selfishly trying to have Disneyland lives now, we must understand where we are and why. We must believe the truth

about this life and the next. We are not here to make this place our home. We will never experience heaven on earth in this life or our best life now.

This is a battleship, not a cruise ship, and as we learn studying Peter's letters, we are aliens and strangers who are passing through. The Lord is not ultimately slow in keeping His promise to return; rather every single day we are here is a day of opportunity for others to come to know His love before it's too late to see His glory. And the darker this world becomes, the more brightly His light can shine—and that is why we're here. Not to frantically and constantly seek our own happiness as though this life is as good as it gets, but rather, like Christ, to lay our lives down, running the race He has marked out as we seek to reveal His love, goodness and salvation to those who are without hope. Let's be honest. It's hard...it is really hard! The road is long and the journey is painful—far more painful than most of us could have ever imagined—which is why we must continually look to Him, the One who has finished the race and who began and will complete our race, and the one who endured far more pain than we've ever known. Verse 2 says that **Jesus endured the cross, despising or scorning its shame**, and what helped Him do that was that His eyes were fixed on the Father and the future. It was for **the joy set before Him** that He did this. He knew there was true joy ahead for Him and for us, but he also knew that the road to joy was through the cross. He did not try to veer to the left or to the right to avoid the pain. He didn't choose to live for himself. He chose to die for us. Now He's seated at the right hand of the Father, and He is ready and able to empower and sustain us as we run our race toward Him. That should give us strength and hope.

Verse 3: **For consider Him, who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.** We must fix our eyes on Jesus and remember what he has endured for us, so that we will not grow weary, lose heart, and give up. His willingness to endure such suffering made the way for countless people to find true hope. None of us have faced the hostility that He faced, but we are all called to walk a similar path—*dying to self that others might find life*. It is only when we fix our eyes on Jesus and remember that it's worth it all that we can run with endurance, seeing that there is joy set before us. And just like Jesus, one day our painful road will be finished; our joy will be complete. So we are to continue to focus on Him, that we might not grow weary and give up. These things are critical to finishing well, and finishing well is critical for the sake of your own soul, but also for the sake of all humanity.

Do you have any idea just how much your race matters? You see it's not just you; it's not just me; it's all of us who've been called to run, to reveal the glory and plan of God to a desperately fallen and broken world, filled with people who desperately need redemption. God has made the way ever since the fall in Genesis 3. He has been about revealing His plan for His triumphal reversal of our catastrophic rebellion, and everyone who has ever followed him by faith is in the race.

Do you realize that what makes Hebrews 12 so powerful and so important is Hebrews 11? For in Hebrews 11 we read of the faith Hall of Fame, all of those named and unnamed who have gone before us, who have faithfully fought, followed and served Him, who have successfully completed their race. But what Hebrews 11 tells us is that many of them suffered in ways that are unthinkable to us, and almost none of them ever fully received in this life what they were hoping for. Why? The end of chapter 11 is just amazing to me. Verse 39 says:

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39-40)

I love how it's worded in The Message:

Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.

Wow! Because of us, those who lived between them and us—us today and all of those who will live long after we're gone—all of us! We are all in this together, and one day we will all celebrate the completion of the race together! In the meantime, they are in our corner cheering us every step of the way. **Therefore since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside encumbrances and sin which entangles, let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus in running to the joy that is ahead.** All who have gone before us bear witness to the faithfulness of God, that it is worth it to run this race to completion. Because even if we don't receive all that we hope for in this life, He is worth it—and His promise is true! There will be a day when our faith will be sight, when there will be no more tears, no more death, no more sorrow, no more pain. We will be with Him, and then for all eternity, together with them, we will experience everything our hearts have truly wanted. That is the truth. We are not there yet. We're still in the desert, on the journey. We are not home yet, but we will be one day, and in the meantime we run. We are called to run in this great race for Him together, with each other and with all of them.

Maybe this year you're weary, just like I have sometimes been. Maybe you're letting the pain and the struggle of this life cause you to slow down in your run toward Him, or perhaps even to veer off course and to begin running toward other things, with the misguided hope for happiness, believing this is your best hope for your best life. But I urge you to run to Him! And in accordance with Scripture, I promise you two things. Number one: In this world you will have trouble; the race will not be easy. But number two: You can take heart, because He has overcome the world, and no matter how hard it is, no matter how hard it gets, it is worth it to run the race toward Christ! I promise you for all eternity, we will never regret anything that we have done to move toward Christ or, in His strength to move out on mission to help others know His love! I promise you, one day the pain will end; the joy will be complete—and He will be worth it! Let's pray:

Our Father, we thank You so much for Your truth. Lord, we need to be reminded that it is worth it to run this race. But sometimes in the midst of the pain, we want to quit or we want to divert and just try and find happiness now. Remind us, Lord, that You are worth it, and for all eternity we will never regret running the race for You. In Your name, Amen.

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