

Running the Race of Faith

Lord, thank You so much for pouring Your heart out to our brother Josh, for just how precious You see us, and how great the cost You paid to save us. I just commit myself to you, let my words be clear, and may I be used as a vessel to communicate to Your body what You want to say. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Today I will be discussing, "Running the Race of Faith." The passage that I derived all of this is Hebrews chapter 12, and I will be discussing this in three parts starting with the very first one. What is our calling? Why do you ask?

Run the Marathon Race of Faith Marked Out for Us

Hebrews 12:1-3: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Let's break that down. First, "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." I believe this is a very clear calling for us believers, because from that we can learn that this Christian life that we are called into is one of great endurance and perseverance. It is not just a short little sprint. Oftentimes, I think we might desire when we get saved, we live a nice Christian life, easy going, and then we get called up to the Lord. However, I do not think that is often the case because we know it is one that requires much endurance, and it is more of a marathon. If you have ever been in a marathon, as you are running it, you are thinking to

yourself, why did I sign up for this? It just feels like forever, and for that good reason I never signed up for one of these things.

With Much Opposition

Second, “Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Thank the Lord, God knows how tough this journey of faith is for us, so Christ is our example, and He is our motivation to press onward. I am so glad that Christ leads us if we abide in Him, and I am confident that we are in good hands. I am about to dive into a little bit of a personal story, and this is also kind of why I chose this theme of running the race of faith.

Back in high school I decided to sign up for the cross-country team. It is called cross country because you are running not only on plain flat grass but also through the woods and jumping creeks. Compared to my friend Barret here who runs the track, when you are running track, you are on a nice, paved circle, which is so satisfying to run on. Meanwhile with cross country, look at someone next to me, and he is going through it. The reason why it looks like I am smiling is because the reason I signed up for cross country was not because I liked running; it was because I was more of a soccer player, and I wanted to condition my body for the upcoming season. So, I just ran for fun; he ran for seriousness.

But I think our Christian life is often like learning cross country. You must endure so much, but I learned two good qualities that make a good Christian runner.

Perseverance

Number one is perseverance. The best runners push themselves even when their body is telling them, “Stop! Please stop! Take a break!” In the same way, since we are called to persevere, our eyes need to be fixed on Christ, the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

Confidence

The second one is confidence. A good runner understands that the course that they are running is not impossible, that there were runners before them who accomplished the course. In the same way, we need to remember that Christ came before us, and He endured the opposition from almost everybody and then endured the cross. He is now seated at the right hand of God, glorified. So, that is a wonderful thing that we can have confidence in, knowing that Christ came before us, and He is interceding for us right now. Therefore, as Christians we need to understand that as we run this race, we must endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ according to II Timothy 2:3. That needs to be part of our mindset.

Distractions

The second part of running this race is that oftentimes we will face some problems. What is it? Why do I ask again? There will be distractions. Unfortunately, in cross country the wood section of the course there are roots and sticks and rocks everywhere. I do not know why they would even let us run on this, but we did. Does not that look like a Christian life sometimes? There is a narrow gate, which is hard, but we are running it together, right?

Let me tell you another story. In a race one time, I remember going so fast thinking in my head, I am about to get a record for myself because of how fast I am going. I reached the woods portion, and I started thinking, "Oh, how about the people behind me. I cannot let them pass me. I must keep on going." So, I start looking back, and the next thing you know I tripped on a root and go straight down. If you have ever run a long distance, you know that once you get into a tempo, it is easy to keep going until you must stop, and once I fell it took me a couple minutes just to get back up, recuperate, and push on. When I crossed the finish line, I was bruised and battered, and my knee was bleeding. That was one of the slowest races that I had ever run because I fell; I got distracted by the

people around me. I stopped focusing on running the course I had before me.

So how many times in our race of faith will distractions make us fall as well? These examples can include career, relationships, reputation, money, fame, security, power; you name it. All these things can cause us to take our eyes off Christ while we are running and stumble.

The Israelites Stopped Building the Temple

Let me go to an example that we find in the Bible of distractions. Case study—the Israelites. I am going to read from:

Haggai 1:1-4: “In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’”

Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?””

What can we learn from this? Here is a little background of these Israelites. A good number of them were exiled by the Babylonians when they came in and wiped out everything. Then the Persians came and destroyed the Babylonians, and the new Persian King was like, “Hey, a couple of you Israelites can go back and rebuild.” So, a group of them and Ezra returned and started building the altar for sacrifices and laying down the foundation of the Lord’s temple. But then, because of opposition from the neighbors they stopped, and they began building their own houses. They said, “Okay, our neighbors do not want us to be building the Lord’s temple right now. Let me just go ahead and focus on building my own habitation, my own life. Let me fix it up, let me make it fancy.” And we can see that the Israelites lost their priority by focusing on themselves

rather than what the Lord had in His heart. The Lord wanted a dwelling place among the people, yet they did not see that.

God's Solution for Believers is Discipline

So, what does the Lord do to bring us back from these distractions that we might face? The solution that God often uses is discipline. The issue with a distraction is that we sometimes might grow so comfortable living in it that we are not even aware that it is a problem. That is why the Lord must discipline and train us and sometimes even allow trials and hardships to come into our lives to bring us to our knees in prayer.

Proverbs 3:11-12: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in."

Notice how it says, "Do not despise the Lord's discipline, and do not resent His rebuke." It is almost as if when writing this he knows that the reader in reading this might have some sort of bad reaction to the Lord's discipline. I can relate to this by thinking back to when I was younger, and my parents had to discipline me. At the time, it did not make sense, and I often said, "Mom, dad, stop doing this to me. You guys are disciplining me because you do not love me. You are taking away my stuff, you are locking me in my room because you do not love me." However, in looking back, I am so thankful they did that because they did love me, they wanted me to grow, they wanted goodness from me, a better future, and that is why they disciplined me.

The thing is if we belong to God, then He is a Father to us, and He will discipline us because He loves us.

Hebrews 12:11: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Of course, discipline never feels good in the moment, but what are the fruits that it produces? The discipline of the Lord produces

righteousness, and I think that is what my parents were hoping for when they disciplined me when I was younger.

The Discipline for the Israelites

Going back to our example of the Israelites. You remember how they got distracted building their own fancy houses? How did the Lord discipline them?

Haggai 1:10-11: “Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the olive oil and everything else the ground produces, on people and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.””

The Israelites got struck with so much drought they could not really grow any of their crops, and their livestock was suffering. And I think this was a necessary thing that the Lord did to make sure these Israelites would once again seek God. Imagine if they started building their nice, paneled houses and all the crops they were planting were thriving. Why would they need God, right? So, the Lord used this type of discipline to bring them back to Himself.

So, what was the Israelites’ reaction to all this training and discipline and trials?

Haggai 1:12 says, “Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the Lord their God had sent him. And the people feared the Lord.”

Praise the Lord! The people got convicted, and not only were they convicted, but they responded and obeyed the Lord because they had such reverence and fear for Him.

There is a Crown of Life for Those Who Press On

So, for us we can learn to press onward. I do not know what is going on in your own personal lives. I do not say that this is an all-encompassing comprehensive view of everybody's race of faith. This is just what the Lord has revealed to me, a twenty-one-year-old, and I know that oftentimes when I get distracted, the Lord must bring in some hardships to focus my eyes back on Him. What we can learn from all this is that brothers and sisters must remember we are bought with the blood of Christ. God gave His greatest treasure, Jesus, to us. Who would just give you their best thing and then try to harm you for no reason? God is not like that. He has already given us Jesus, and everything He now does for us is for our own benefit. God's discipline and trials draw us closer to Him. It hurts in the moment but at the end it is supposed to produce fruits of righteousness if we endure. And thankfully we can run this race of endurance together while fixing our eyes on Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

I want to leave you with one last verse, James 1:12: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

Let's continue to press onward, keep our eyes on the Lord and run this race together.

Lord, thank You so much just for how our calling from You is to run this race of faith with great endurance and perseverance. It is not one that we can complete quickly but thankfully, Lord, we have You by our side this whole time. It is going to be tough, but thank You for one another as well, and we can lift one another up and use our prayers to intercede for one another. I just pray that today we might all just be encouraged to press onward and not let anything currently going on in our lives drag us down from our calling. Thank You so much, in Jesus' name. Amen.