

The Need for Endurance **Hebrews 12:1-3**

So far, the author of Hebrews has taught us that in order to live by faith in troubling times, we have to understand what faith is – that it actually changes your life because you not only believe in God, but also that he will fulfill his promises and reward those who seek him. We’ve also learned that in order to live by faith, you have to see yourself as a stranger and exile here on earth. You have to be willing to suffer the loss of things in this life because you’re looking forward to your homeland in heaven where there will be fullness of joy forever. And then last week we saw that to live by faith you have to have courage in the face of danger and fear, especially when it comes to the fear of persecution.

Let’s read our memory verses together (I’ll try not to screw up this week!). Hebrews 10:32-39: *“But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”*

Now, in verse 36, it says, “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.” Today we’re going to talk about endurance, and endurance is why this book was written, because the people it was written to were tempted to give up. They had started off strong, but now were growing weary of pressure and persecution.

For a lot of Christians, there is an initial surge of excitement and passion when they first come to Christ and experience forgiveness and freedom and a new life. But as time goes on, the silver lining begins to fade and it can be tempting

to throw in the towel, especially if there's persecution and suffering. And that's what we can see on the horizon for Christians in America. We've had it good for a long time but we're starting to see hostility grow and we could be facing more pressure and persecution and know what it's like to be tempted to turn away.

We are in need of endurance, because it doesn't matter how good you start, you have to finish. And in our passage today, the author is going to teach us how to endure. To do that, he uses the metaphor of a race. I've run a lot of races in my life, but only a few where I've had to endure. I remember one race where Luke Wittkop and I decided to run the half-marathon together on the Stower Trail. We had only been training about 4-5 weeks and I had never run a half-marathon before so I didn't really know what to expect. We started the race nice and slow – we weren't trying to win, just to finish. And I was feeling pretty good. But about 3 miles in, we must have run under a beehive because I got stung out of nowhere, right on the chest. So now I had a bee sting to contend with, which definitely didn't help.

We got to the halfway point over by Wanderoos and turned around, and I was feeling pretty good. But by the time we hit the 10-mile mark, I was starting to suffer. My legs hurt and felt like lead and my whole body was exhausted. That was also about the time when we ran under the same beehive, and I got stung again! This time right on top of the head! From that point forward, all I wanted to do was quit. It was miserable. But we pushed on and made it to the end.

We had a great start and I wanted to run, but when things got painful I really wanted to quit. And that's what happens when it comes to living by faith. We start out well, but then get tempted to quit. We need to learn endurance and the author of Hebrews is going to help us with that in our passage for today.

Having just given many examples of people who lived by faith and endured suffering, hardship, and persecution, he now calls his readers to do the same.

Hebrews 12:1-3

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.

The author uses the metaphor of a race to encourage his readers to endure in faith. He's not talking about a sprint or even a marathon, he's talking about a lifelong race. We who are in Christ are in this race. Verse 1 talks about being surrounded by witnesses, and oftentimes the picture that comes to mind is of me running a race with the people of old that we read about in chapter 11 lining the sides of the road, cheering me on. So I assume they're witnesses of me and my race. But I think there's a lot more to this picture than that.

As I studied these verses I learned that the people of old that we read about in chapter 11 are not merely spectators who are witnessing our race. They are actually witnesses *to us* as we're running. So the focus isn't on our race; it's on theirs. The Bible Hub Topical Lexicon says: "*These prior testifiers—named in Hebrews 11—stand not merely as spectators but as proof that persevering faith is possible. Their collective voice urges endurance.*" Having gone before us and finished the race, they are now showing us that endurance is possible, even through hardship, suffering, and pain. Their lives are a testimony of God's faithfulness and that running the race is worth it.

So I think we should picture it like we're running through a gallery full of portraits and stories – people of faith who endured to the end. Some of them lived quiet lives of endurance; some lived through hardship and saw victory; some endured great suffering and even died for their faith. But all of them persevered. All of them made it to the end. All of them finished the race and are receiving their reward. We are surrounded by their stories as we keep running this race together.

Since their lives show that running and finishing this race is possible, the author then gives his readers some critical running advice for endurance. First, he says, "*let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.*" If you're running a long distance race, the last thing you want is extra weight to carry around or clothing that hinders you. Those make endurance much harder. And so it is with enduring in faith.

The author urges his readers to lay aside every weight and sin and I think he probably had two things in mind. By weight I think he means things that aren't inherently sinful but still weigh you down and make endurance difficult. I think Jesus touched on this in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 6:19-24 says, *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*

I've run into this now that we own hunting property. There's a never-ending list of things I can do to make improvements on the property, and I enjoy doing them. But if I give myself over to doing those things, it affects my heart and becomes a very noticeable weight that makes it harder to live by faith. I need to be careful to set limits and keep it in the proper place. And it's been a growing process for me.

If you're caught up in living for the things of this world, even if they're not inherently sinful, it's going to make endurance in faith much more difficult. There's nothing wrong with money, possessions, career, family, health, home, hobby, and entertainment, but they can also become a heavy weight in the life of faith. Are you holding on too tightly to these things? And are you willing to lay them aside for the sake of Christ?

The author also brings up “sin which clings so closely.” What sin is he talking about? He could be talking about any sin, but these would be sins that people of faith tend to harbor and tolerate in their lives. Jerry Bridges wrote a book entitled Respectable Sins and I found that he writes about the subtle and often tolerated sins that Christians and churchgoers tend to overlook in their lives. These include: ungodliness, anxiety and frustration, discontentment and unthankfulness, pride, selfishness, lack of self-control, impatience and irritability, anger, judgmentalism and a critical spirit, envy and jealousy, sins of the tongue, and worldliness.

I don't know about you, but when I read that list, I realize I have more close-clinging sins than I thought. These are things that restrict our running and make endurance difficult and we need to be diligent to lay them aside.

The second part of running advice is simply to *“run with endurance the race that is set before us.”* If you've ever done long distance running, you know that endurance running doesn't just happen. You might be able to go out and run a couple miles, but you can't just go out and run a marathon, or even a half-marathon. There's a lot that goes into “running with endurance.”

I looked up the training plan for a person who runs ultra-marathons, which are 100-mile races. I don't know why anyone would run that far, but they do. What do you have to do to run that kind of distance? One training plan I looked at included these things, and we see many parallels to living by faith:

- First, you need to log a lot of miles and you need to do so gradually, at low intensity, over a long period of time. You actually have to transform your body, heart, lungs, and mind to be able to run that far. And that's exactly what we need in the Christian life. We are in the process of transformation of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that doesn't happen overnight. You have to log a lot of miles over a long period of time. It takes years of daily Bible study and prayer, years of fellowship, worship, and service in a community of believers. Transformation happens over time.
- Second, an ultra-marathoner has to continually give their body the proper nutrition. The only way your body can hold up and have enough energy to run 100 miles is if it has the right nutrition and hydration throughout the race. You can't just get a good meal the night before and guzzle a water bottle before you run. Again this speaks to endurance in faith. We have to regularly feed on God's Word and abide in the spiritual life of Christ. He is the vine, we are the branches. He is the bread of life. He is the living water. We need to eat and drink from him regularly.
- Third, an ultra-marathoner needs to incorporate days of rest to allow their body to recover. For them, that means resting from running. For us that means resting from regular work and busyness and abiding in Christ. Practicing a Sabbath. Getting away for an extended time to connect with Jesus.

- Fourth, an ultra-marathoner needs to be familiar with the course. What kind of terrain are they running in? Where are the hills? How long are they? How many are there before the end? For the Christian we need to be familiar as well, especially with those things that can make it harder to endure. We need to be aware of temptations and distractions and pitfalls to avoid. We also need to know that we have an enemy who wants to get us off track, and how to defeat him.

Living by faith isn't a sprint; it's an ultra-marathon, and we need to do these things in order to run with endurance the race set before us.

Now there's one more bit of running advice in our passage for today, and it's found in verses 2-3. It's interesting to me that after giving so many great examples of faith in the previous chapter, he doesn't tell his readers to look at any of them; he tells them to look to Jesus. He doesn't say "Looking to Abraham, or Moses, or Sarah, or Rahab," or any of the other people in chapter 11. Their examples encourage us and show that endurance is possible, but the only example of living by faith that is worthy for us to look to and follow is Jesus.

I point that out because it seems that in our day and age we have the tendency to look primarily to popular preachers and authors to teach us how to live by faith and Jesus becomes secondary or completely forgotten. Charlie Kirk, John MacArthur, Priscilla Shirer, Susie Larson, Jobie Martin, and many more... They're men and women of faith, but they're not the founder and perfecter of our faith! They're just other runners trying to finish the race and they have flaws and shortcomings like we do. We can learn some things about endurance from them, and they can point us to Jesus, but they shouldn't be the example that we turn to. There is only one perfect example of living by faith and the author of Hebrews draws all attention to him. If we are going to endure through this struggle, we have to look to Jesus.

Jesus is the founder of our faith, and he is the one who will bring it to completion. He is the one working in you, building up your faith. And when you look to him you see the perfect example. The author of Hebrews says that "for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He had the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. The joy set before him was the

joy of being reunited with his Father in heaven and with all his redeemed and adopted brothers and sisters that he came to save. So, with the assurance of that joy in mind, and complete faith in his Father and in his promises, he endured the suffering and shame of the cross. He could have walked away, but he didn't.

It was on that cross that he bore our sin and bore our shame and became the object of the Father's wrath. And because he went through that, he conquered sin, death and condemnation for all who trust him and look to him. He persevered in faith, and has received his reward. He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, high above every rule and authority, giving us everything we need to persevere. That's who we follow. If we are going to run the race and endure in faith, especially in troubling times when we're weary and feel like giving up, we need to look to Jesus.

After looking at these things, you can see that enduring in faith takes a lot of effort and intentionality. Christ has done everything we need for salvation and gives us everything we need to run the race. But we need to run. We need to fight the good fight of faith. And we need to endure. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27: *"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."*

Perhaps the Lord has stirred in your heart this morning in response to this message. Maybe there's an area of your life where you can see you need to grow in. I encourage you to take some time to pray and come up with an action plan and discuss it in your small group.