

Hebrews 12:1-3 // Running the Long-Distance Race of Faith

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 00] So we'll begin at Hebrews 11, verse 8, which is on page 1209 of the Bible in your seats.

He obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.

He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

[1 : 15] All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

Instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son.

Even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. And so in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

[2 : 22] By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. By faith, Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born because they saw he was no ordinary child and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith, he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger.

He persevered because he saw him who is invisible. We will continue from verse 39. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

[3 : 52] 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 that was 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.

Thank you very much, As, for reading, and it's brilliant to see you all.

Let's bow our heads and pray as we come to think about what God has to say to us. Father, we pray that by your Holy Spirit, your word would do its work in us tonight.

Prepare our hearts, we pray, to receive it rightly. Strengthen our faith. Lift our eyes to Christ and help us not merely to hear your word, but to trust it and obey it for the glory of Jesus.

[5 : 14] Amen. Well, it's often said that the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint. Now, that's become a bit of a cliché, but clichés usually become clichés because they're true.

And actually, that idea is rooted right here in Hebrews chapter 12. Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

So if you are a Christian, you are a long-distance runner. The Christian life is about endurance, continuing to trust Jesus over the long haul, one foot in front of another.

Now, it will come to absolutely nobody here tonight as a surprise that I have never run a marathon. I have no intention of ever running a marathon.

The only part of marathon preparation that genuinely appeals to me is the carb loading beforehand. That part I feel spiritually gifted for.

[6 : 23] So while preparing for tonight, I thought I'd better speak to a couple of people who actually know what they're talking about. People who know what marathon runners call hitting the wall.

When the legs start burning and somewhere around mile 22, you begin asking yourself, why did I voluntarily do this? So I spoke to my brother, Peter.

Now, he's run more than 30 marathons and ultra marathons, personal best two hours, 38 minutes, which is apparently quite quick. And I spoke to Amy Armstrong, who many of us know here at St. Silas.

And she recently ran her first marathon in Belfast in the very respectable time of three hours and 58 minutes. Though she wanted me to emphasize, just in case anybody here hadn't already realized, that she was carrying a stress fracture in her tibia, caused by too much running, which already tells you something about marathon runners.

In fact, when she went into the running shop, Achilles' Hill and Great Western Road, to buy new running shoes, they basically staged an intervention. Kian, who works there, who comes to St. Silas, said, no one in this shop will sell you shoes.

[7 : 43] We all know you're supposed to be in a boot. Even her GP tried to stop her. Eventually, the GP more or less gave up and said, well, I can see you're going to do it anyway, which Amy interpreted as an enthusiastic medical endorsement.

Well, I asked them both the same question. What does it feel like when you hit the pain barrier in a marathon? What does that feel like?

Peter said, it doesn't matter how many marathons you run. It never really gets easier. In every race, there comes a point where you're digging deep and asking yourself, why am I doing this?

Same question to Amy. And she said, there wasn't a single point in the race where I questioned it. I never doubted I was going to reach the finishing line.

And when it comes to the Christian life, I suspect there are probably people in both categories here tonight. Some of you are flying spiritually.

[8 : 53] You're full of the joy in Christ, running strongly. And praise God for that. But others are tired, weary, discouraged, spiritually flat, struggling with sin, struggling with disappointment, struggling simply to keep going.

And if we're honest, there are moments where spiritually it feels like we've hit the wall. The Christian life can feel like a bit of a slog sometimes.

And Hebrews 12 is written for exactly that moment. It gives us three pieces of advice for long-distance Christian endurance.

Three pieces of advice. First piece of advice, look around. Run encouraged by faithful witnesses.

Now when Amy ran the Belfast Marathon, one of the things she said afterwards was how much the crowds carried her along.

Kids leaning over the barriers with their hands out, people shouting names. She said she found herself high-fiving kids all the way around the course. Because one of the things that keeps runners going is encouragement, the noise, the crowd, the sense that you're not doing this alone.

[10 : 11] Now when we picture in our minds long-distance runners, we often imagine a lonely individual battle. One person digging deep, endurance of pain, pushing on alone.

And in one sense, of course, that's true. But when you watch something like the London Marathon, there's 40,000 other runners running together, crowds lining the streets for hours and hours, strangers cheering on strangers.

And you realize even in an individual race, other people help you to keep going. And that's exactly the image that Hebrews gives us here.

Chapter 12, verse 1. Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Now sometimes people picture verse 1 in Hebrews like heaven's stadium. Abraham and Moses leaning over the balcony on a Tuesday morning watching you get about your life and clapping you on like that.

[11:19] That's probably not quite the point that the author's on about. The emphasis isn't mainly that they are looking at us, but that we are looking to them.

These men and women from chapter 11 are witnesses in the sense that their lives testify to the faithfulness of God. Their stories still speak.

And as we look to them, they're saying to us, we trusted God and it was worth it. That's the force of Hebrews 11.

Ordinary, flawed believers who kept trusting God through suffering, uncertainty, disappointment, and delay. And our Hebrews says to us, run like they did.

Look at Noah. Look at Noah. Imagine how absurd his life must have looked. Building a gigantic ark for a flood that nobody else had ever seen.

[12:21] You can almost hear the mockery, can't you? Still worried about judgment, Noah? But Noah's life says, trusting what God says is wiser than trusting what everybody else says.

Or think about Abraham. Abraham. His eyes were fixed on eternity. Because he was looking for a better country, a heavenly city, he was willing to make life decisions that looked ridiculous.

Leaving behind everything familiar. Waiting years and years while the promises seemed impossible. But Abraham's testimony still speaks.

God is worth trusting even when you can't yet see what he is doing. Or think of Moses.

He chose disgrace with the people of God over the comforts and the good life of Egypt. He looked at everything Egypt offered. Status, wealth, power, the approval of the elite.

[13:29] And he said, no thanks, I'd rather belong to God. And that's costly. Because obedience to God will sometimes mean saying no to things that the world considers impressive.

Sometimes faith means standing out, being misunderstood, feeling out of sync with the culture around us. But all these believers in chapter 11 testify to the same thing.

A life of faith is not a wasted life. It is the life that pleases God. And one of the striking things about Hebrews 11 is how different their stories are.

That's what we were thinking about last week when Andrew was preaching. Some saw astonishing victories. Others experienced unimaginable suffering.

There are high peaks and deep valleys in the marathon of faith. Hebrews is realistic about that.

Following Jesus does not guarantee an easy road.

[14:37] And every one of them bears witness to the same truth. The race is worth it in the end. And that matters because we can feel desperately alone sometimes.

You may be the only Christian in your wider family or in your friendship group outside of church. The only Christian at work or on your course at university.

Trying to live for Jesus can make you feel outnumbered. But Hebrews says you are not running solo. You run in the company of countless believers who have gone before you.

So when the race gets hard and it will look around since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us run the race.

Second piece of advice look within. So let's throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

[15:44] Such a vivid image. And actually if you watched the London marathon you'll know that there's always people running in fancy dress. Not just elite athletes trying to shave seconds off their time.

People dressed up in all sorts of wacky costumes. One of my colleagues Amy, different Amy who was praying earlier, has a brother who believe it or not used to hold the world record for running a marathon dressed as a doctor which is kind of niche.

But it meant running the whole thing in medical scrubs with all the extra gear. And by the final miles, apparently the stethoscope around his neck felt like a lead weight.

And that's fine I suppose if your goal is novelty. But if your goal is endurance, if your goal is to run the race well, you don't voluntarily carry extra unnecessary weight.

Hebrews says that's exactly how Christians should think about the race. If something is slowing your endurance, if something is spiritually weighing you down, why keep carrying it?

[17 : 00] If the race matters, strip things back. Get rid of anything that slows you down. because if we're serious about running the long distance Christian race, there will be things that we need to lay aside.

And Hebrews mentions two distinct but related things. First, everything that hinders, and then the sin that so easily entangles.

So weights and sins. And not everything that slows your faith is sinful. But it may still be deadly to your endurance.

Some things are simply cumbersome. Not wrong in themselves, but over time they can drain spiritual life from you. Clog the soul. Slowly squeeze Jesus to the margins.

Well a few months ago I was driving back from a conference up north when suddenly the emissions warning light came on in my car. The engine felt a little bit sluggish. Turns out the diesel filter had clogged up.

[18 : 06] And the mechanic basically said it needs a proper run to clear it out. And once it cleared, sure enough, the engine came back to life. Well spiritually, I wonder if that's where some of us are at tonight.

Not dramatic rebellion against God, just a little bit clogged up. Still come to church, still basically keep going, but the joy has dulled.

And maybe if you look back, honestly there was a time that you were running the race more freely than you are now. More eager to read God's word, quicker to pray, more wholehearted in your service.

But now you feel spiritually heavy, lethargic. work. So let me ask you honestly, what are the things that might be clogging you up?

What's making it harder to run the race than it needs to be? It could be any number of different things. For some people it may be career.

[19 : 19] Now the Bible is absolutely not against ambition or diligence or using your gifts well. But career can become quietly all consuming. For some the pressure is climbing higher.

For others it's the fear of falling behind, trying to establish yourself. And before you realise it, work has swallowed life whole.

No energy to pray, no meaningful involvement with God's people through the week. But as far as work's concerned, always available, always reach reachable, always exhausted.

And spiritually you're trying to run a marathon with the equivalent of a pallet of bricks on your back. I remember a wise Christian speaking very wisely about stepping back from a senior leadership role at work.

They did that voluntarily. Less status, less money, less prestige, and the world hears that and thinks, why not would you do that? But this particular Christian had realised I'm losing the ability to run the race well.

[20 : 34] I don't have the space to serve Jesus faithfully in these areas that I feel called to anymore. Or take relationships. There's nothing wrong at all with desiring to be in a godly relationship.

relationship. But if you're not careful, that desire can slowly take over. You can spend more and more time daydreaming about being loved by somebody else than enjoying being loved by Jesus. Or maybe for you it's something else. Fitness, appearance, social media, academic success, none of these things are necessarily bad.

but even good gifts can become spiritually heavy when they consume all your mental and emotional space.

And your spiritual life can become sluggish. You know something else? Even church activity can become a weight.

[21 : 39] And that's important to say, I guess, in a church like St. Silas, serving matters enormously. That's what we were thinking about this morning.

The church only functions because God's people pour themselves sacrificially out for one another. But it is possible. It is possible to become so relentlessly busy doing Christian things that your own soul starts running on fumes.

Always serving. Never slowing down. Never letting God's word properly nourish you. because if you are too busy to pray and read the Bible, you are too busy, even if the reason is serving in church. You need to check your own heart because what is a weight for one person may not be for another. So this takes honest self-examination.

how can you tell if it's becoming a weight? You can pray for discernment. Ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of anything that's dragging you back.

[22 : 53] And why don't you talk to wise Christian friends? Sometimes they can spot what we can't see in ourselves. But alongside weights, Hebrews speaks even more directly about sin.

let us throw off the sin that so easily entangles. And here the tone sharpens because sin doesn't merely weigh us down.

It trips us up. Sin is ensnaring. It's like trying to run a marathon with your shoelaces tied together. And many of us know what the spiritual equivalent feels like because there are sins that we come back to again and again and again.

And Hebrews has already warned us about the deceitfulness of sin. Sin always over promises and under delivers. Promises freedom and it produces slavery.

It promises life and yet drains life from us. That's true of greed, bitterness, pride, lust, pornography, every secret sin that we quietly come to terms with.

[24 : 15] The more that we indulge it, the more the cords wrap themselves tightly around us until eventually we wonder why does the Christian life feel so hard?

Well, of course it does. You're trying to run with your legs tangled. Perhaps for some of us this passage is there for a moment to draw a line.

Not vaguely sometime in the future but today, tonight. To stop dragging it along with you. To bring it into the light, to confess it, to ask another Christian, another trusted Christian to pray with you.

Kill it before it kills your endurance. Now we do need to say carefully, there are some burdens that Christians carry that simply cannot be thrown off.

Some people here are carrying grief or chronic pain or loneliness or opposition or caring for a loved one through struggling.

[25 : 26] And Hebrews is not saying if the race feels hard, you automatically must be failing. Sometimes the road itself is simply hard. Sometimes believers are limping.

Sometimes brothers and sisters, we are simply crawling on our hands and knees towards the finish. But even then, Hebrews says, don't make the race harder by carrying things that Christ never asked you to carry.

So this passage, I think, invites deep honesty. What is helping you run towards Jesus and what is slowly dragging you away from him?

A wonderful prayer this week would simply be, Lord, show me what needs to go. Last piece of advice, most importantly, look up fix your eyes on Jesus.

Athletes talk a lot about focus, having something steady in your vision when everything in your body is screaming at you to stop. Back in the 2014 Commonwealth Games here in Glasgow, Scottish runner Lindsay Sharp won silver in the 800 metres.

[26 : 47] It was an extraordinary run, especially because the night before she'd been seriously ill in hospital on a drip and after the race as she lay exhausted on the Hamden track, TV cameras zoomed in on four words that she'd written on her hand, get out strong, believe.

Something for her to hold on to when everything hurts. Because endurance is never merely physical, it's deeply psychological. Marathon runners know that.

You break the race down, you break it into parts, you focus on the next drink station, the next bend, the next lamppost, that's how you keep going in long distance running.

And Hebrews says the Christian life is exactly like that. It's a long distance race and if we're going to endure, we need something to fix steadily before our eyes.

But notice where Hebrews tells us to look, not ultimately inward, not mainly at ourselves, not even finally at the great cloud of witnesses from chapter 11, but verse 2, fixing our eyes on Jesus.

[28 : 03] That is the great secret to endurance in Hebrews. Fix your gaze on him, your saviour Jesus. Verse 3, consider him, consider him, think deeply about him, meditate on him, study him

through the scriptures, meditate on the crucified, risen, ascended, son of God, now at throneed at the right hand of the father as our great high priest.

And as we look to him here in our passage, Hebrews shows us two glorious things. First, Jesus is the one who's already run the race.

He's already run the course from start to finish. He is the pioneer, the trailblazer, the one who has gone ahead of us. He knows the road. He knows suffering from the inside out, opposition, rejection, loneliness.

He knows what it is to obey God through tears. And in that sense, he is our example. What kept Jesus going? Verse 2, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame.

And verse 3, consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Jesus endured the cross because he could see beyond it, beyond the suffering, beyond the shame, beyond death itself, to the joy beyond.

[29 : 38] What joy? The joy of being returned to the Father and bringing his people there with him. Which means when the Christian life gets hard, you're never being asked to walk a path that Jesus himself has not already walked.

He has gone before you. Hebrews chapter 2 says, the Son entered our humanity in order to bring many sons and daughters to glory.

Your struggles are never foreign to him. He understands completely what you're going through. But Hebrews says something even more wonderful than that.

Jesus is not only the example for the Christian life, but he is the power for it. Jesus is the one who perfects our faith.

Verse 2 again. Fixing our eyes on Jesus, a pioneer and perfecter of faith. He doesn't merely complete his own race. He carries us through ours.

[30 : 47] And what a comfort that is. Because if this passage simply said, come on then, try harder, we'd all be crushed.

Because who here feels like we're storming the Christian life? Who here never stumbles, never struggles, never slows down, never doubts? Even the heroes of Hebrews 11 were not like that. You go back and actually read their stories, Abraham, Moses, Samson, David. Their lives are messy, full of weakness and fear and failure.

Hebrews 11 verse 40 says, they too were waiting to be made perfect. They needed Jesus to perfect them every bit as much as we do.

And maybe some of us feel that very deeply tonight. Because as we've thought of throwing off everything that hinders us, throwing off every sin, we know that there are things in our lives that need to change.

[31 : 55] compromises, distractions, patterns of sin. And maybe if we're honest, we don't feel like very strong runners at all.

Maybe some of us feel like we're barely still in the race. And this is where Hebrews gives such extraordinary comfort. Because Jesus is not standing at the finish line shouting, hurry up, get your act together.

He is our great high priest at the right hand of God interceding for us, praying for us, holding on to us always. Chapter 7 verse 25 says, because He always lives to intercede for us, He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him.

He saves us completely so we can make it all the way home. He will not lose His people. He's got you.

Jesus has got you. It's a beautiful picture of that from this year's Boston Marathon. A runner called Aaron Beggs saw another runner, A.J.

[33 : 11] Haradasa, collapsed near the finish. His legs had completely gone. He couldn't get up. He couldn't make it to the finish line. And Aaron Beggs stopped his own race, sacrificing his own personal best, put A.J.'s arm over his shoulder and carried him down the final stretch to the finish line.

It's a wonderful picture, but even that falls short because Jesus doesn't merely help us finish.

He does everything necessary to bring us home. He gave himself for all our sin and stumbling. He gives us his spirit to empower us for the race, to give us the will to keep going.

And now he continually represents us before the Father. So where do weary Christians look? Not to ourselves, certainly not to our performance, but to Jesus, the pioneer, the perfecter, the great high

priest who will bring his people safely home.

I love the words of the old Scottish preacher Robert Murray McShane. He used to say to his congregation, for every one look at yourself, take ten looks at Jesus.

[34 : 32] That's Hebrews 12, 1 to 3. Fix your eyes on Jesus. And if tonight you feel exhausted, discouraged, spiritually weak, like you're hardly putting one foot in front of the other, the one you're looking at, the one you're looking to is utterly committed to getting you home.

Well, amen, and let's pray. Father, as we've been reminded, the Christian life is not a sprint, but a marathon.

And so we pray, strengthen us, strengthen us by your spirit to keep running with endurance, where we are carrying unnecessary weights.

Give us wisdom and honesty to lay them aside, where sin has become tangled around our feet.

Bring it into the light and grant us true repentance.

patience. And for those among us who are weary or struggling simply to keep going, would you remind them tonight of your love, your faithfulness, and the joy set before your people in Christ.

[35 : 53] Help us to keep fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And keep us running until the day we see him face to face, for we ask it in his precious name.

Amen. Well, we're going to respond now with confession.