

Romans 12:1-8 \\ Church - The Body of Christ

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[0 : 00] If the Christian life is a marathon, would you keep running?! It's 87 kilometers, and it's not easy.

See, one year, you either run uphill the entire way, or the next year, you run downhill the entire way from between two cities, Durban on the coast and Pietermaritzburg in the foothills of the Drakensburg.

And it's incredibly tough to run. And many start out on it, and having started out on the marathon, they get to about kilometer 46, 47, 65, 73, and they fall out and eventually stop running.

And so, if the Christian life is a marathon, would you keep running? Would you persevere in running to the end of the Christian life? And the great theme of this section that we're looking at tonight, we're just going to look at those first three verses in chapter 12, is perseverance.

And if that's the theme, then the shock in this passage comes right at the end. And that is where he lists those who give up on the Christian life.

[1 : 42] And he gives a warning to us not to give up on the Christian life. And when people give up on the Christian life, that is really sad, isn't it?

So let me tell you about a friend of mine called Sally. And Sally grew up in a Christian home. She was raised by Christian parents. Her dad was a faithful elder in the church for many years.

He worked faithfully, and eventually he retired. His daughter was a Christian. He married a lovely Christian girl. And then in retirement, he lived in Australia. He left his daughter, and he left his wife.

And he went and he lived in Indonesia, and he opened a brothel there. He left church behind. He had given up on the Christian life. And that was terribly bad.

That's a bad thing. Let me tell you about another friend of mine, Sue. And Sue was a very intelligent girl. She studied medicine at Cambridge, got her first.

[2 : 45] And she came down to London and joined our church there. And she did everything at church for 10 years. Kids work, kids ministry. She helped out in all various ways and sorts.

And then one day, Sue met a girl who she fell in love with. And she had feelings for her. And she couldn't reconcile what she believed and knew to be true in the Bible with how she felt about this girl.

And eventually, she stopped believing what she knew to be true in the Bible. And she decided to follow her heart and go and leave the church and pursue this relationship.

And we can understand that that's a hard thing. But it's also very, very sad. But it's not always all bad. Many of us live the Christian life in great hardship and suffering.

So let me tell you about another friend of mine, Kate. Kate's a Christian girl. She was born in a Christian family. And Sunday by Sunday, for 20 years at my previous church, she would serve in the kids ministry there.

[3 : 54] She longed to have a family of her own. And Sunday by Sunday, she would teach the under threes, clap your hands, praise the Lord. Sunday by Sunday. And it was a great hardship too.

All her friends were getting married. She wanted to move on to the next stage of life, stop doing kids. And it's great sad, but she plotted on in the Christian life, knowing it was the right thing to do, that in the future there would be a glorious prize for her in store.

Let me tell you about a last friend of mine, Sam. And this is a sad story. Sam, when she was born, her father passed away when she was two. And her mom brought her up in the Christian faith.

And she went to university. And at university, she met a lovely Christian boy. And then at 23, her mother passed away. And she was very sad about that.

And she thought, why God? Why would you do that? Why would you take my mother from me? And then a little later, her boyfriend, who she loved, confessed to her that he struggled with same-sex attraction.

[4 : 59] And Sam, while she loved her boyfriend very much, and she understood that he loved her, it was a step too far for her. And so she broke the relationship off.

And there was a great sadness in her. She wondered, why had I to go through that suffering? Wouldn't it be easier to give up on the Christian faith?

But she knew that in the future, Jesus had a great store for her in store. And so she keeps on plodding with the Christian faith, Sunday by Sunday, even though it's incredibly hard and sad.

And so if the Christian life is a marathon, will we keep running it in the midst of great hardships and sufferings? Will we consider Christ, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame?

And just where we are in the letter of the Hebrews, the letter of the Hebrews is a sermon. It's a sermon written to a congregation who are being tempted to give up.

[6 : 06] They were initially going very well in the Christian faith, but they've encountered persecution and opposition from the culture around them, from the Jewish temple that they had come out of to follow Jesus.

And so in chapter 10, verse 32, we read how the author says to them, Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in great conflict full of sufferings.

And what he does is, in chapter 12, is he's picking up the argument from where he left off in chapter 10. And in chapter 10, he's told them that Jesus is the real thing, that everything else next to Jesus is only a shadow, chapter 10, verse 1.

But in Jesus is reality and the hope of things to come. And then in chapter 10, verse 10, he says, there is no other way to be right with God than through Jesus.

And so I'll just read it for us. And by that will, we have been made holy right through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once and for all, his death for our sins.

[7 : 23] And then at the end of chapter 10, he challenges them to persevere, living for Jesus, even in the midst of great suffering. And then in chapter 11, that we looked at over the summer, he gives a great list of heroes or anti-heroes of the faith, who don't do great things, but who stick at following Jesus, even though they never knew Jesus, even in the midst of great suffering and trials and hardships.

They keep believing in God, even in the midst of great hardships. And then in chapter 12, we reach the climax of the letter. And he takes us to the top of the mountain, as it were.

And he introduces us and he shows us to Jesus and how awesome Jesus is. And so he says, but you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to Jesus, 24, the mediator of a new covenant.

So something better and greater than anything you had before. And then at the end of the chapter, he says, if you've come to that Jesus, why on earth would you ever give up?

Why on earth would you walk away from him? Keep going in Jesus. If the Christian life is a marathon, keep running. And so what we're going to do tonight is we're simply going to dwell in these first three verses of chapter 12.

[8 : 55] We're going to wallow in them. We're going to think about them and savor them and enjoy them. And we're going to look at two points. So if you note, take our first point there is following Jesus means running the race with perseverance.

Following Jesus means running the race with perseverance. And then secondly, we're going to consider following Jesus means fixing our eyes on him.

Following Jesus means fixing our eyes on him. So firstly, following Jesus means running the race with perseverance. And the picture that he is painting here is of a runner running a race.

And it's not a sprint like Usain Bolt, but perhaps better a marathon, as it were. And he says that they have this great cloud of witnesses that we considered in chapter 11, and that they need to run the race with perseverance.

The end of verse 1, the race marked out for us. And I've only run one marathon rather unsuccessfully years ago, but my cousin has run a marathon.

[10 : 07] And there should be a picture coming up. It's not of him, but this is how he ran it. He ran it in a rhinoceros suit. That was the London marathon. He did that.

It's a really sweet story. He ran it just before his wedding, and then they raised funds for rhinos, and they bought a Land Rover here and his fiancée, and they took her down to Africa. And it's very obvious to see what would make running that marathon, that race, a lot easier.

Getting rid of the rhino suit. I asked him what it was like. He said it was absolutely horrendous. And the author of the Hebrews says that if we are running the marathon of the Christian life, the same is true for us.

Just look in verse 1. Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And he's not talking about a rhino suit there.

But what I think he is saying is the thing that will make us give up on running the Christian life isn't a lack of willpower, of thinking, yes, we can. We can do it.

[11 : 16] But rather, when we let sin creep into our life. And I think the particular sin that he is talking about then is that when we are faced with opposition and suffering from the culture around us for running the Christian life, that we choose to blend in with that and accommodate ourselves to that rather than stepping out from that and living the victorious Christian life, enduring opposition and suffering.

And my suspicion is that for a lot of us here, we won't be like the author of the Hebrews' first readers. We won't be people who are facing opposition from the temple back then.

But it might be that we are facing opposition from our own temples, our culture, and from what our culture says is the things that we should be living for and the things that our culture says is important.

So it might be you should be free to marry whoever you want to, irrespective of gender. You should be free to choose your gender for that matter. And if you disagree with culture, you're a bad person.

That's wrong. It might be that in order to be successful in life, then you need to give up on this religion stuff and you need to buy a big house and a big car and get married.

[12:45] Singleness is bad. If you want to be successful in life, then you must live for the now and not for the future. And I don't know if you guys have had a similar experience tonight.

I imagine there's a couple of experiences that we might be having with us when we're faced with the attractions of culture. And the one is that we might have started coming to church and initially it was wonderful.

It was really exciting. All our friends were at church. There was a bit of a buzz. We'd go to Sunday services and the preacher would always have something insightful to say and exciting.

And all our friends were there. And being a Christian would be easy. And as we go on, we might, some of our friends might give up on the Christian faith.

And going to church becomes a bit harder. You've heard everything the preacher says. And then at that point, the attractions of culture and what culture says becomes a lot more attractive.

[13:51] And then temptation to give up on running the Christian life seems a lot more real. On pursuing that car, pursuing that house, pursuing whatever the next best thing is.

Alternatively, here's another experience that you might be going through. You might be, have gone through the experience of COVID and you've rather enjoyed not being on ministry teams.

It's been a good break from church. Or you've enjoyed rolling out of bed or staying in bed wherever you are in your pajamas and watching church from bed at home.

And it might be that you have enjoyed not having the awkward coffee chat after the service when the minister says, why don't we all talk to one another? And you've rather enjoyed that.

I know we don't have coffee this week or tea this week, but it will be coming soon. And it might be that despite the best will in the world, your morning devotions or your evening devotions have taken a bit of a back seat.

[14:53] And it's in that instance where you've gone off the boil a bit that the temptations from culture seem so much more appealing.

Why don't I just give less to church and save up more for overseas holiday when COVID's over? Why don't I try and get the next big job promotion and spend a bit more time at work rather than helping out at church?

Or why don't I just go along with the office banter or whatever it is rather than enduring opposition and suffering and being marked out as that odd Christian person at school or work, whatever it is.

And the author of the Hebrews says, throw those desires off. Throw those thoughts off. Throw off that sin, that wanting to blend in with culture that so easily entangles and that hinders you from running the Christian race victoriously.

So just note there, he says at the end of verse one, the race marked out for us. It's God's race, run God's way that will lead us into joy with Jesus.

[16:17] And so let me ask you, are you giving in to sin? Are you accommodating culture in your life, in your workplace, at school?

Or are you enduring opposition and suffering for believing what Christians believe and for putting your hope in the risen Lord Jesus? So secondly, so firstly, following Jesus means running the race with perseverance.

And secondly, following Jesus means fixing our eyes on Him. And he's building on the metaphor of the marathon runner in this point.

So if you can imagine marathons back then, they wouldn't have flags marking out the route, but if you want to stay on the route, the route goes over the horizon. So you need to pick a mark in the distance.

And no matter what happens, you need to keep your eye on that mark. If your head dips, or if you lose your mark, or if you think it's, you don't actually have to pick one, very quickly, you're going to veer off course and you're going to stop running the race in the right direction.

[17:26] And you're going to get utterly lost. And so the author, at the beginning of verse two there, he exhorts us to fix our eyes on Jesus. Fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Here's our mark, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And pioneer there, I think what he's saying is, Jesus has cut the path for us. He's set the course.

He's shown us how to live this victorious life. He's gone before us. And then perfecter, it means that, I suspect, that Jesus has done it completely.

There's nothing more that we can add to faith. So just notice there, he's the perfecter of not our faith, but faith. He has brought us into the presence of God by his once and for all sacrifice for sins that we can in no way add on to.

So, Jesus is the pioneer in that he's shown us how to live the life, run the race victoriously, as a model, as an example, something to be copied.

[18:38] And so we're meant to look at Jesus and look at our life, look at Jesus, look at our life, and figure out how we can run that race well. And then, he is the perfecter.

He has saved us completely, in no way lacking for our sins. And in that way, he's become a savior, someone to be adored, and worshipped, and loved, and drawn near to.

And so, I wonder if, if you find yourself, if you find your head dipping in the Christian life, and you become stepping back from faith in Jesus, and you've gone off the boil a bit, and you've become a bit tired at going to church, or a bit disillusioned, or a bit disheartened, the thing that you need is not a new regime, it's not a new routine, not a new quick fix, not a new Christian experience, but the thing that you need is a new love for your savior, who has perfected faith, and done everything possible to bring you to God.

So, and we see what a glorious savior he is from where we are in the letter of the Hebrews. So, chapter 11, he gives this great list of heroes who are really anti-heroes, and they're all deeply sad and broken people.

So, we've got Noah, who got drunk, and Abraham, who kept on lying about his wife, and then you've got Samson. He should be no one's role model, but they persevered and believing in great trials.

[20:21] They had a great savior, and they needed a savior. And then, at the start of verse 12, he exhorts us to throw off sin, to not give up on Jesus, but rather continue in sticking with Jesus despite opposition and suffering.

And then, in verse 2 and 3 of our reading tonight, he gives us the example par excellence of the savior that we need. The one who, faced with suffering, suffering, the physical agony of the cross, did not shrink back, but endured it.

The one who, when faced with opposition from culture, from the temple, from the Romans, did not try to blend in or accommodate, but endured it.

The one who, faced with the ignominy and embarrassment and shame and dishonor of the cross. The God of the universe hung like a thief on the cross.

Hands that flung stars into space, pierced by nails, he shrugged it off. And who, the one who, when his creation, opposed him, who spoke lies about him, who rejected him, he endured it and did not grow weary or lose heart.

[21:41] And so, when we are faced with opposition and suffering, verse 3, the author of the Hebrews takes us to Jesus. He shows us the author and perfecter of our faith.

Verse 3, consider him, dwell on him, think about him, abide in him, live in these thoughts, wonder about them, discuss them with your friends, chew them over, wallow in them, day by day.

And just notice there the thing that kept Jesus going. I wonder if you spotted it. Maybe some of the eagle-eyed Bible readers would have spotted. Verse 3, for the joy.

What is the joy that you would go to the cross for? What is the joy that would lead you to endure opposition and suffering?

And I think we might endure opposition and suffering for family and friends, but I can't think of much else. But Jesus goes to the cross for the joy set before him.

[22:50] And it's easy for us to think, well, that's just Jesus doing his God thing. That's Jesus being Jesus. But Jesus goes to the cross, fully God and fully man in the fullness of his humanity, who delights in loving others and who delights in obeying his heavenly Father and looks forward to being with his heavenly Father forever in heaven with a great crowd of people around him.

And who, for that joy, would endure all things and would do so so that we could be there with him in heaven.

And just notice where Jesus is right now. He's seated at the right hand of God. And the good news of the gospel is that if we trust and believe in Jesus, then we will be with him there.

But first, we have to run the course. We have to persevere. We have to go down and then up to glory. Isn't that brilliant news? Let's pray.

So Father, we thank you for our almighty and glorious Savior. We thank you that he endured opposition and suffering and brought us to our God.

[24:35] We thank you that he has brought us to Mount Zion, the city of our living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, where we'll be with thousands upon thousands of angels and joyful assembly forever and ever.

Amen. I think we have a song.