

Hebrews 12:1-2 "Let Us Run With Perseverance The Race Marked Out For Us"

In the last few weeks we've walked down the hall of the faithful, who in ages past, walked with God and trusted in Him and His promises. If this were in a hall of fame setting we would see the portraits of a young David standing over the body of Goliath; Noah, warning the people of impending destruction as he worked on the ark; Abraham, saying good-bye to family and friends as he left Ur of the Chaldees and followed God to the promised land.

The entire eleventh chapter is for our encouragement to show us that ordinary people were able to walk the path God had given them. They were able to overcome, in many cases, insurmountable obstacles as they placed their faith in God who is faithful.

But more important, these people are seen to be a testimony to the grace and mercy of God who calls people out for Himself and gives them the faith they exercised to follow Him. They are a testimony of how much God loves us and desires to have fellowship with us, both now and for eternity.

They are also a testimony of how they followed the Lord to the very end despite opposition and hardships. They, by faith, understood the magnificent future they were to enjoy with God forever. Their present situations could not compare with what God had in store for them, and they were willing to give up the present pleasures of this life for the surpassing greatness of eternal life with Him.

The saints of old, both men and women, saw with eyes of faith and looked beyond this world. It was this truth that allowed them to persevere together with God's strength and grace and they are commended for it in chapter eleven. But they are for our example, they are for our edification and encouragement. We must be able to learn from them in a way that allows our faith to grow.

And as we walk with God we too will be found in this hall of faith with these saints of old, though not written in the book you have on your laps this morning, but most certainly written in the Lamb's book of life. That's a good book to be in.

And so our writer begins to take what we've seen previously and will now begin to make some points so as to encourage us to continue on in faith.

HEB 12:1 "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."

Our writer begins by giving us this picture of a cloud of witnesses. The idea here is a massive host or group. And the group he has in mind is the saints he spoke of in chapter 11 along with all the rest of God's people who have ever believed before Christ came into this world, but who had placed their faith in the Messiah to come.

This imagery is reminiscent of the promise God gave to Abram in GEN 15:5-6 "He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

These who have gone before are this host, this cloud of witnesses. They are, however, not witnesses in the sense that they are spectators, watching us and witnessing our lives. Rather, they are witnesses in the sense, as F.F. Bruce puts it, "that by their loyalty and endurance they have borne witness to the possibilities of the life of faith. It is not so much they who look at us as we who look to them -- for encouragement."

But what is it about their lives that can be an encouragement to us? Once again, they show us that sinful, weak and rebellious people can experience the living God as He reveals Himself to them and they can be transformed to live for Him with the promise of living forever with Him.

They also show us that God was always with them, strengthening, building up, utilizing them for His work and enabling them to stand firm to His glory. This is what our writer wants these Hebrew Christians to see, as well as us.

You see, these Christian Jews in the first century were tempted not to walk faithfully and persevere to the end. They were tempted to go back to the ways of old and follow the traditions rather than the truth and the One who gave that truth, God Himself.

Our writer is trying to show us that in living by faith our comfort zones may be infringed upon, but it is not our comfort zone we are to be living in. We are to be living by faith and sometimes this will invade those zones and force us to make choices that put God first instead of ourselves.

All of life involves choices. What God is doing is training us in righteousness so that our choices are motivated by the Spirit to embrace the things above instead of limiting ourselves to making carnal choices, which we're all prone to do.

Abraham made carnal choices along with David and the rest, because they were humans with a sin nature like ours. But, that's not what God wants us emulating. He wants us to look to those who went before, with all of their weaknesses and frailties, and yet chose to live by faith in God as they chose, for the most part, those things that pleased God.

That takes commitment, it takes loyalty to God and above all it takes a love for Him which places Him on the throne He sits on as King and Lord, as well as Father and Comforter. It's an understanding who we belong to, and it's not ourselves.

This is what Paul tells us in 1CO 6:19-20 "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

The saints of old understood that they no longer belonged to themselves. In fact, throughout Israel's history they were instructed by God to be separate from the nations that surrounded them, not because they were to be inhospitable, but because those nations would influence Israel to turn away from God to false gods.

Their choices would be carnal and in turn they would not faithfully represent God in this world. Instead of choosing to honor God they would honor themselves and place themselves ahead of God's will. In the process they would dishonor the One who had given them life and hope and a future with Him.

TIT 2:11-14 "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."

Our writer warns these Hebrew Christians not to take lightly the call they've received from God to walk with Him by faith. But to live by faith one must choose not to live by sight.

There must be a putting off of one and putting on of the other.

EPH 4:22-24 "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Again, we see choices involved. When we're tempted to walk by sight we will invariably revert back to our former way of life. Faith, sees this, and struggles not to go back and will seek God for strength to walk in the new self, as the old is opposed.

That's what happened with the saints of old and what God desires of us today. That's why this life we live in this world is referred to as spiritual warfare. There's always a battle going on for the hearts and minds of God's people. It's a battle from without and from within. But, in Christ we have the armor we need and the strength we need to overcome and be victorious in Him, because He has conquered death and sin for us.

So, what are some practical things we can begin to utilize to walk in the faith God has given us? Well we read in HEB 12:1"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."

Our writer begins with "let us throw off everything that hinders..." The NAS says, "let us also lay aside every encumbrance...", while the KJV puts it, "let us lay aside every weight..."

The idea here is that whatever load we are carrying around that would slow us down in our walk with Christ should be discarded. The load could be an area of our lives we're not willing to give to Christ. The load could be not using the means to grow strong in Christ which is through His word and prayer, the fellowship of the saints or worshipping together.

The load could be our wrong attitude toward our spouses or towards other people. It might involve a wrong attitude about material possessions. There are a variety of things that can weigh us down with an inability to live by faith, which we're not willing to give up.

And yet our text says to lay it aside or throw it off. The metaphor used in this first verse speaks of an athlete competing in the games looking to win the prize. In ancient Greece most competitors ran with little or no clothes on. The loose fitting clothes they wore were an encumbrance to allowing them to compete successfully, and so they would literally throw it off, lay it aside.

God doesn't want us running around naked. However, He does want us to run the race in such a way as to win the prize. To do that we can't be adding more weight to ourselves, burdening us in our attempt to run successfully.

When I played football in high-school I used to work out in the off-season by running sprints as well as long distance for endurance. When I ran I used ankle weights. And the reason I did this was to strengthen my legs. But, there was an interesting phenomenon which happened as soon as you took those weights off. It was like you were running on air. It seemed you could run twice as fast. The weight of your legs wasn't felt.

This is the same reason baseball ball players, who are in the on-deck circle, swing a weighted bat. Just before they get to the plate they swing this bat which would never allow them to get around in time to hit much of anything. But you take that weight off and immediately the bat seems feather light and it allows you to get around on the ball faster.

You could never play football with any degree of effectiveness wearing heavy ankle weights any more than you could effectively hit a baseball with a weight on your bat. And yet we're surprised, as Christians, when we can't seem to get off first base with our walk with Christ because we carry spiritual weights we're not willing to throw off.

We're waiting for them to fall off. And believe me they will not just fall off, especially if we've fastened them tightly. We need to make a conscious choice to identify the weight, to loosen the weight and then take off the weight.

And it's all done by faith. Faith in knowing that God will replace it with something better; the ability to run the race unencumbered. But our comfort zone will chime in, 'but I've always run the race this way, I'm not sure I can trust God to enable me to run it any other way.'

Throw it off, is what God says. But notice what our writer then adds when he speaks of throwing things off.

HEB 12:1"and the sin that so easily entangles,..." We sometimes think it doesn't make any difference if we hold on to just one little sin. 'This one little sin and I have known each other for so many years and we've grown fond of one another. It's not a sin which is hurting anyone else and quite honestly I don't see the big deal.'

The big deal is not one little sin, but the way that sin entangles us and can often lead to other sin. If we become lax in one area, it will most definitely effect other areas as well. If anyone here has ever been on a diet you know what I mean. Remember, the first week of your diet? You measured everything. You only ate the proper foods. But as you got into week two and three, you began to say to yourself, 'I've done so well, it won't hurt if I have just a little of this cake.'

It was easy to just take a small piece and live with that for a few days. But it tasted so good. And what started out as a small piece turns into a wedge of cake. It's the same with sin. There is no such thing as justifying a small sin, because all sin in God's sight is wrong.

We get entangled a little and we don't seem to notice it, but the entanglement always gets worse unless we are willing to throw it off. By faith we look to God who forgives sin and enables us to do just that. Praise God He is there for us to get untangled and back in the race.

HEB 12:1"and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." There is a contrast here in our text which the writer makes clear. In the first part of this verse we were told to lay encumbrances and sin aside. Now he says, to run.

Sometimes we can get the first part. We may come to the Lord and confess we've sinned and that our attitudes or practices have been a weight which we need to put off. And we may even put them off for a time. The problem is we're not willing to then engage our hearts and minds in a way where we take our new agility and weightlessness and run in such a way that seeks after the prize.

Instead we glory in this new found faith and resolve and we sit on it. I can remember in my own life when I would come to the Lord

and say, 'Lord, I've sinned against you and now I'm going to get serious with you and not go back to the ways of old.' And the Lord would bless me and I would feel great.

But then I would find myself going back to the ways of old and wondering why. It was because I had not taken this new strength and done something with it. It's like taking your car to a gas station with a car wash, and filling it up with gas and then washing it, but not put it in gear to drive away. It looks good and it's fueled up, but it's not going anywhere.

God fills us with His Spirit to go somewhere, not to sit in a pew and rev our engines once a week. Faith is always meant to move. This is what we saw in chapter eleven. They were moved to leave their country. They were moved to dwell in tents as strangers knowing that their future home was on the new earth in resurrected bodies. They were moved to confront kings with the truth of God's word.

Faith always has feet. And what we see in this first verse of our text is that faith will put off the old and put on the new to go somewhere. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."

Every believer has been put in the race by God Himself. Paul knew this when he said in ACT 20:24 "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Paul was given a specific task by God. The task God gave to Paul is not exactly the task He may give to you or me. There is, however a similarity in the tasks as Paul mentions in Acts; "testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

We're all given that task. But we're not all called to be pastors, teachers or evangelists for example. You might be called to something more important. And what makes it more important is that it is God who has called you to your special task. I've known men who have sought after the gift of Pastor, who were not called by God to such a task.

How important was that task to God for that person? If God didn't call him then its importance for that person has been diminished. This is why we can't say of ourselves, if only I had this or that gift I would be important in the Body of Christ.

No, your task, the race that God set before you is the most important thing God wants to accomplish in your life. Sometimes we're busy trying to run someone else's race. God is the one who sets us on our course. And yes, it's true that the race is similar in that all of us are on the same path to Christ. And that race is designed to bring honor and glory to Christ as we follow Him to the finish line.

But, our Lord will not use us all in the same way on this path. Have you ever seen the Iron man competitions, or the marathon? Sure you have. You ever notice the people on the sidelines? Maybe not. They are vital to the race. There are people who man water stations. There are people who chart the course for the racers. There are people who are the trainers for the athletes who meet them on different parts of the course to update them on their time and to let them know the times of other runners.

There are the cameramen who are usually riding motorcycles to keep up with the cyclists and to update you and me of their progress. There are the judges making sure the rules are kept. We can go on and on. The point is that despite the attention the runners get, it doesn't make the other people any less important, because without them the runners would never be able to compete at the level they do.

It's the same with professional athletes. Who gets all the attention in the NFL? The quarter backs, the running backs and the wide receivers. Why? Because they get the ball and everyone follows the ball. But there isn't a wide receiver, a quarter back or running back in the NFL who would ever be able to get the glory if it were not for those guys on the line opening the holes, giving the quarterback the time to throw so the wide outs could receive the pass.

Every job is vital and every task God gives to people in the church is as well. You may wonder at times what task God has given you. Well, the one task He has given you has to do with being a faithful witness of His Gospel. You can do that anywhere. Another way to begin discovering your specific task is to seek God and the gifts He has for you.

He may have gifted you with hospitality. Are you using that gift? That might be part of your specific race. Maybe He's gifted you in the area evangelism. If you've got an overwhelming desire to give people the gospel, that might be one of your gifts. Many of you

are parents and have the privilege of nurturing the next generation in the Lord.

Maybe God is tugging at your heart to teach. Are you using the means God has given us in His word to grow into a ministry of teaching? There are a myriad of different things we can be doing in the Body of Christ and they certainly aren't limited to just one or two areas, but the one thing we must all be willing to do is to run this race of faith with the idea of finishing the course and honoring our God in the process.

Our writer tells us to run this race with endurance. The Greek word for endurance or perseverance in our text is *hupomone* and it means cheerful (or hopeful) endurance, constancy.

Endurance often carries with it the negative idea of drudgery, a real pain. And though there may be pain in the process faith hopes in the assurance it has in Christ, faith has a conviction of things not seen concerning the promises we have from God, and so it continues down the path with the cheerful expectation of gaining the prize who is Christ. It doesn't throw in the towel because Jesus Christ fights for us.

In fact, our writer makes this abundantly clear in the next verse.

HEB 12:2 "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

This is how we endure and persevere to the end of the race in which Christ Himself has placed us. We look to Him, we keep our gaze on Him.

I had a baseball coach in high-school who used to play for the Padres, who would never let us forget when stealing second base that you never look at home plate and the catcher who's about to throw down to second.

A turn of the head to your left and you lose a step. Sometimes that's the difference between being safe and out. You never take your eyes off of second base. That's your goal and you don't look back.

It's similar to the race we've been placed in by our Lord. We're running well, and then there's a distraction in life; money problems, marital problems, problems at work and we have a

tendency to look away from our goal of following Christ by faith and we lose a step or two as we stumble in the process.

But instead of getting up and looking intently at our Lord we sometimes keep our eyes on the obstacle. And there's where we get ourselves into trouble because it's hard to keep two different focal points in focus. And we know that, but it goes back to choices and we will often decide to focus on the problem instead of on the problem solver, Jesus Christ.

We need to fix our eyes on Jesus, which means we are to attentively look to Him and His Word, where His solutions and grace are there so we can endure by faith. This race we're in necessitates we run effectively according to the rules.

It's a race where discipline must be engaged because the enemy will try and pull us off track every time. We must recognize his tactics and flee from them as we put on the full armor of God.

1CO 9:24-27 "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

That's discipline in action. This is what faith in Christ produces. It's a discipline which follows the One who has gone before us; the One who already has traveled the path perfectly successful, and bids us to follow Him.

He is the Author and perfecter of faith because He has blazed the trail. The word author could also be translated Captain or Chief leader. It is certainly true that He has authored our faith in the sense that He is the Giver of faith, but here in our text He is seen as a trail blazer who has perfected faith in Himself while on earth as an example of One perfectly trusting the Father for all things.

This is why we look to Him. He's been there and He knows what we go through, but He also joyfully triumphed through every trial and temptation. And where did His joy come from? Enduring the cross and despising the shame for you and me. You and I are His joy and He loved us so much that He died for the penalty of our sin

so that we might be set on a course to meet Him face to face one day.

But as our text also says, "He has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." He is risen from the dead, He has defeated sin and death and gives us the victory. That was His joy and still is. And we share in that joy as we share His life by faith.

Many Christians run the race as though there were no finish line and they get discouraged, naturally so. They think this world is the winner and we are here just to get bounced around. No, our Lord loves us too much for that as an end in itself. His joy was to die for us. Our joy is knowing He loves us and we have life in Him.

Our joy in Christ keeps our eyes on Christ. And as we keep our eyes on Christ we too will despise the shame of suffering and trials and temptations because we see beyond this world with eyes of faith and we endure to the end because Jesus is at the finish line waiting with open arms.

Let us run looking to Jesus. We are more than conquerors in Christ. I like the way Jesus addresses the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation. May we take His words to heart for ourselves.

REV 3:21-22 "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Let's keep our spiritual ears and eyes open and attentive as we look intently at our Lord and Savior and follow Him. He gives the endurance and perseverance we need. Don't be tempted to get off the path. Stay close to your Great Shepherd. He will lead us in the way we should go.