

"See Jesus as Your Greatest Encourager"

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Who's your biggest fan?

Who always supports you, always defends you, is always there when you need encouragement and tells you what you need to hear? While I'm hoping we can all say our spouse, or parent, child or our friend, I'm going to boldly tell you that as good a fan of you that you think they are, there is someone else who's an even bigger fan of you, and that's Jesus.

The unknown author of Hebrews was encouraging discouraged Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith in the Roman Empire under the rule of Nero. It was around the time when the city of Rome burned and Nero would seek to blame the Christians, having many of them burned alive or thrown to the lions. In a few years he would order the executions of Peter and Paul which happened in 67 AD. Its quite clear from Hebrews that the temple was still standing so it had to be before 70 AD. Because, in the letter the author warns his readers not to go back to the sacrificial system, which some had or were tempted to do just to escape persecution for following Jesus. The Romans didn't persecute Jews, only those who claimed Jesus as their Lord.

So the whole letter of Hebrews is really about encouraging one another to remain faithful to Jesus. In Ch. 10 he gives them a warning in v.26-31 about what happens to people who reject God and His Son Jesus. But then he encourages them in vv.32-39,

³² Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. ³⁶ You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ³⁷ For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay." ³⁸ And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." ³⁹ But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

So to keep encouraging them in Ch. 11, the author reminds them of Old Testament story after story of men and women who persevered in their faith and then concludes it in 12:1-3 to remind them that Jesus waits at the finish line of life encouraging them to complete the marathon of Christian maturity.

As we wrap up our series 'See as Jesus Sees' this week and next Sunday, I want us to see Jesus as Jesus sees Himself. Remember, Jesus is the Word and He and the Holy Spirit are the authors of the Word, working through holy men of God. So Jesus by the Holy Spirit through the author of Hebrews shows us that He is our greatest encourager standing at the finish line

Patiently Waiting for us to Finish Well
(12:1)

This is one of many images Jesus wants us to have of Himself (and that includes God and the Spirit). This is important for us to realize because I think many times we think Jesus or God are wearing a frowny face most of the time; like an over-demanding parent expecting perfection. And think of this in the context of Hebrews, a book about believers doubting whether living for Jesus is worth it. But here he wants to motivate Christ followers who are undergoing difficulties to know that Jesus is our greatest encourager, patiently waiting for us in all our successes and failures, to finish the marathon of the Christian life. I say patiently because if He's at the finish line and we're only at the early or middle stages of our marathon that means He expects us to finish and He's willing to hang in there with us.

Don't let the chapter division at Ch. 12 make you think we have started a new section. Actually, 12:1-3 is the concluding argument from Ch. 11 why we should persevere in our faith. In these 3 verses there are only two commands; the other verbs describe why or how we should obey these two commands. And the two commands are "Let us run the race set before us" and "Consider Him having endured such hostility". If we were to read this literally this is how it reads,

*Therefore, since we have surrounding us = so great a cloud of witnesses,
laying aside every encumbrance and the most besetting sin, through endurance*

LET US RUN the set before us race looking away to = the author and completer of the faith = Jesus who for the set before Him joy ENDURED a cross, Shame despising, and at the right hand of the throne of God **HAS TAKEN HIS SEAT**

*For **CONSIDER HIM** Having endured such hostility by sinners against Himself,
in order that you will **NOT GROW WEARY** fainting in your hearts.*

Let's start with the main verbal statement that governs v.1-2, 'Let us run the set before us race'. Ch. 11 is a record of past God-following marathoners whose races that were marked out for them were all different. Let us run the race marked out for us means,

Jesus knows each of our races (v.1)

If you've ever ran a long race or jogged a long stretch, you know the course. You know where you go up hill and downhill. You know where the tricky spots are if the terrain is rough or traffic is busy. We usually know these things beforehand and can pace ourselves or even brace ourselves for them. But we don't know what our life entails. We don't know tomorrow, or next month or year. But Jesus does. He marked out the race for us. He knows what will happen and since He's at the finish line He's confident that we'll get through it. [This is only one side of an image of Jesus which we'll focus on in this chapter for today but next week we'll focus on an ongoing 'with us' image that He also gives us because He's with us and at the finish line, since He's God]. But in the context of persevering faith over the long haul this is what He wants us to see.

In Ch. 11 we read about many races. We read about Noah. Noah's race included building the ark. Did anyone else have to build an ark? No. Abraham's race involved obeying God's Word to sacrifice Isaac. Did anyone else's race include that? No. Joshua's race involved leading an army 6 days around a city in absolute silence and then shout your heads off on the 7th day because that's always the way to knock over a city wall! But no one else had to do that.

At the end of Ch. 11 we get a summary of other races:

³³ *who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was*

turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; ^y they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

Some escaped the edge of the sword while some were killed by the sword. Everyone's race is the race God marked out for them, and that's comforting. Knowing that means God's in control, He believes we can handle it and Jesus believes we have the faith to persevere and that's why He's at the finish line.

This is our assurance when we go through tough stuff. It didn't surprise Jesus. He and God oversee our individual races and enable us to persevere through them. So keep running the race marked out for you. If He didn't think we could endure He wouldn't have planned it that way.

How do we run the race? How do we keep a steady pace in the marathon of Christian maturity so we finish well?

'throwing off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.'

Since Jesus knows us inside and out and knows our race He also is

Fully aware of our individual distractions and sinful tendencies (v.1b)

In running imagery. 'throw off' or 'lay aside' is a reference to clothing that slows you down. Metaphorically speaking, things that are okay but don't help you grow in Christ like maturity. Screen time, sports, hobbies, even people can be hindering our spiritual growth because we use them as substitutes for spiritual maturity. In keeping with the imagery, there's nothing wrong with your cloak but if you're going to persevere in a race you need to lay it aside. It's about timing. We've all said to ourselves 'Oh I should do more reading or praying or have people over' but then we let something distract us from doing those things. There is a time for these distractions because we need a break but there's also a time when they can be too much of a distraction and we use them as excuses not to be with God's people or with God Himself.

'The sin that so easily entangles' us refers to those sins we individually struggle with. Might be our mouth or our attitude. Might be a moral issue. Might be an addiction or obsession or something we won't accept is an obsession or addiction. Sin detours us off course. Sin stops us from continuing in maturity. It may seem as small as a broken shoelace but you can't continue ahead until you fix it or get rid of it and replace it. Is there a sin that repeatedly stops us in our marathon of Christ like maturity? Again, Jesus knows about it. And He still waits patiently at the finish line for us to deal with it and move forward. Because

He believes we'll faithfully persevere (v.1c)

We run with 'perseverance'. If you've ever ran a race and began it full out, you quickly ran out of energy. If you don't anticipate obstacles or a few setbacks along the way, you won't persevere. Persevere means to exert energy, to put an effort into it. This isn't works theology, this is planning for the long haul. The race marked out for us will include roadblocks of trials, detours of pain, uphill battles of faith where the downhill stretch seems far away. The picture is of a marathon where the

need is for continual movement forward, continual spiritual maturing day-by-day so that we will mature and endure.

“Let us run with perseverance’. How? V.2 is not a new sentence, (v.3 is). V.2 is a participle explaining how we run the race marked out for us, ‘*fixing our eyes on Jesus*’ then he explains why. Why Jesus? Why not the great cloud of witnesses? Because the witnesses are like us, easily hindered and entangled. But not Jesus. He’s finished. He perfectly obeyed God by faith and persevered.

Jesus Needs to Be Our Focus, Not Other Witnesses **(12:2-3)**

These ‘witnesses’ give us some good examples of how to live by faith during times that required perseverance, but they had their own hindrances and sin entanglements. How then do we keep focusing/fixing our eyes on Jesus? It sounds wonderful and very spiritual ‘Just fix your eyes on Jesus brother’, but if I cant see Jesus how am I suppose to do that? And then I feel defeated because I’m obviously not as spiritual as those other people that repeat all these Christian catch phrases – just trust in the Lord, just fix your eyes on Jesus, just let go and give it to God, etc. **HOW** do I focus on Jesus? What did Jesus do? He endured because He obeyed God. So I fix my eyes on Jesus by

Seeking to obey Him in all aspects of life (v.2a)

Jesus is the focal point because He’s who I’m to grow into and so I need to obey the will of the Father along the road to Christ like maturity. Even when the road marked out for us involves difficulties, as did Jesus’. This what the author means when He says we will run our race with perseverance by focusing on what Jesus did in His, when He endured the cross. How was He able to do that? How can we get through our trials, and even stumbling over our own sins and hindrances? The same way Jesus did through His;

Looking forward to His joy even when we’re hurting (v.2b)

Notice the author doesn’t focus on the crucifixion but rather what Jesus focused on Himself to persevere in the crucifixion. What did Jesus fix His eyes on? The joy set before Him. Notice it’s the exact sane phrase as the race set before us. That means its preordained and guaranteed that we’ll finish. That’s why He’s waiting at the finish line because He has set the race before us. The reason why Jesus persevered in His trials is because He knew there was joy awaiting Him What joy?

When one of the criminals on the cross - who earlier had mocked Jesus but obviously repented of his sins and believed who Jesus was – said to Jesus ‘Remember me when you come into your kingdom’, Jesus replied ‘Truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.’ [Luke 23:42-43]. Jesus was looking forward to the joy of paradise and fellowship with those who repented of their sins and placed their faith in Him. How could Jesus have answered like He had, at the most painful time of His crucifixion if He wasn’t mentally looking forward to what His obedience would reward Him for, and for repentant sinners?

A few hours earlier when He was talking to the 11 after His last Passover, He said this in John 14:1:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Again He's looking forward to the joy that awaits Him when we will be reunited with Him in glory. And then shortly after, John records Jesus' prayer in the garden just moments before His arrest and who's Jesus thinking about? God and us. He's looking past the suffering to the joy that awaits Him and us when He prayed

²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

We forget that Jesus modelled faith Himself. Yes, He's perfect but He perfectly endured His suffering because He trusted God's set before Him plan, that included suffering yet ended with joy. And for how long must we do that?

Until we too are finished with sin (v.2c)

'Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the Father.'

Jesus sat down when His suffering for our sins was finished. We know 'sitting down' implies being finished with sin because the author mentioned it before;

*^{1:3} The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he **sat down** at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

^{10:12} But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

Until we are done this life, until we have finished our race, when our sin nature has been removed then we get to sit down with Jesus and see His glory and experience full eternal joy. But what about now? Here we have the second command (and even stronger language than let us run) here in v.3.

³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

We need to stay focused on the joy that awaits us with Jesus

In spite of opposition from sinful people (v.3a)

That's what Jesus did to get Him through the crucifixion. He endured the spitting and beatings while blindfolded (Prophecy, who hit you?), remained silent when Pilate asked Him to defend the charges that He claimed to be king, endured the mockery from the cross (if you're the Messiah come down; He saved others let Him save Himself), and even forgave them from the cross as they callously gambled for His garment right below where He could see them. This is what it means to consider Jesus and look ahead to Jesus while we are undergoing our own trials, far less than what He endured. Consider Jesus, follow Jesus' example of patient endurance looking forward to the joy that awaits us when we are done with this sinful world and our own sin nature. And, along with so many other 'witnesses' who went before us,

Understanding we also may not receive God's promises here (v.3b; 11:39-40)

“Not grow weary and lose heart” because God didn't answer all your prayers and Jesus didn't come back in our lifetime. The great cloud of witnesses were commended for displaying faith in God in spite of suffering and not living to see Jesus come or Israel get their land or many other promises from God. But 11:39-40 reminds us,

³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect

The great cloud of witnesses that went before us continue to wait for God's plan on earth to be finished and for Jesus to return and establish His kingdom on earth. All God's people are still waiting for these promises. This is the 'better' that awaits us and is the reward of living faithfully, which is defined as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not yet see.

When we go through trials in this life remember, Jesus wants us to picture Him as waiting for us at the finish line because He knows we'll finish even though He knows the race marked out for us individually will be hard at times. Each of us has a unique race. That's why we don't look at each other but at how Jesus faithfully and patiently endured His. Being able to handle the present difficulties because He knew there was great joy set before Him. Knowledge of the future changes how we live in the present. Applying truth makes a difference now.

Jesus knows we're in a marathon. Even though He knows many of us are not near the finish line yet, He's encouraging us on. Pace yourself. Don't worry about tomorrow. Finish today. Look ahead for God's joy and promises. Look back at godly examples. But mostly look at how Jesus faithfully suffered for us, looking ahead to the joy that our salvation will bring Him.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivvet@rideau.net