

Faith that Perseveres

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[0 : 00] All right, let's read from the Bible together. We're reading from the New Testament! Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. And we've been in a series on Hebrews 11, but the logic of Hebrews 11 goes into the beginning of chapter 12, and so that's where we are tonight.

And this is our final look at this series. And this is God's Holy Word. 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, 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.

Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. This is God's Holy Word.

Well, we turn tonight to those verses that Corrie read for us at the beginning of Hebrews chapter 12, as we conclude our series, our short series, looking through Hebrews 11 and into 12.

Chariots of Fire was one of the finest, most successful British films of the 1980s. It's the story, many of you will know it, the story of two sprinters, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, making their way, really, to success in the 1924 Paris Olympics.

[1 : 47] It was a film that received, I think, four Academy Awards, numerous other accolades. And there's a scene in the film that depicts Eric Liddell falling early in a kind of 440-yard race.

It was in a Scotland-France athletics meeting. The scene was filmed here in Edinburgh, just along Golden Acre. And it was based on a real incident.

The actual race in which it happened took place rather in a triangular contest between Scotland, England, and Ireland at Stoke and Trent, July 1923.

Liddell was knocked to the ground several strides into the race. He hesitated. He got up. He pursued his opponents.

They were some 20 yards ahead. He caught the leaders shortly before the finish line and collapsed as he crossed the tape. Eric Liddell was not a man for giving up.

[2 : 53] And as we've noted over the last few weeks, chapter 11 of Hebrews was written, And indeed, the whole of the letter was written to encourage really a group of Hebrew Christians to press on in the way of faith and not to give up.

These Christians were finding the going tough. Surrounded by much opposition and antagonism, there was a real danger that some might throw in the towel and return to their old pattern of life. And so, here in these opening verses of chapter 12, after that long list of Old Testament saints who traveled the way of faith, a writer, in a sense, draws his argument to a close and makes his application.

That application will continue through Hebrews 12. And in a sense, he wants us to understand that all that he has been writing about has been for us, for you and for me, as well as for the original readers.

Paul in Romans 15 verse 4 writes this, For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

[4 : 24] Hebrews 12, these verses were written for us tonight to bring us hope and to bring us encouragement, to help us endure in the way of faith.

Because sometimes that is what we need. We need encouragement. We need to be helped.

Opposition, bereavement and loss, sinful mistakes, disappointments, relationship problems, family difficulties, ill health.

All these things and many more can often wear us down and cause us to despair. We too, like these Hebrews of old, live in challenging times.

It's easy for us to become tired or worn out by the pressures of a world that is hostile to our faith.

And sometimes that temptation to give up or throw in the towel is very real.

Sometimes we can be tired and worn out and feel our faith flagging. And so, let's listen carefully as our writer exhorts us to continue in the way of faith.

[5 : 38] Here's vital medicine, if you like, for our souls, for those times when we feel more like giving up than going on. And I want to highlight five things from our text this evening.

I'm checking the clock at the back, so I don't know if it's stopped or not, but five things. First thing, there's a race set before us.

There's a race set before us. Many of you will know this image, running a race, is an oft-used metaphor drawn from the popular games of the Greco-Roman world, commonly used by many ancient philosophers, Greek philosophers, to illustrate the demands of the moral and ethical life. And in the New Testament, Paul, in particular, uses this image to illustrate the demands of Christian discipleship. So, Paul uses it in places like 1 Corinthians 9, 24.

He says, 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. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.

[6 : 55] They do it to receive a perishable wreath, wee and imperishable. Galatians 5, 7, he writes, You were running well.

Who hindered you from obeying the truth? Philippians 2, 16, he talks about not running the race in vain. And in his very final letter, as he faces execution, he describes himself as one who has finished the race.

And here, the author of Hebrews picks up and develops that self-same image and exhorts his readers in these opening verses of chapter 12, Let us run with endurance the race set before us.

He's speaking about this race of faith. The idea is not that we are competing against one another in this race, but we're running rather the race that God himself has set before us.

In the race of faith, we have our course to pursue. The Christian believer runs not along, ultimately, the route of his or her own choice, but the route that God has set before us.

[8 : 11] When we become a Christian, we are entered into the race of faith. It's a race, I think the NIV puts it, that God has marked out for us.

We do not determine the length of this race or the conditions we will face as we run the race. These matters are ultimately in God's hands.

We are not captains of our own destiny. We are not ultimately in control. That is an illusion. And yes, sometimes there are great and wonderful blessings that encourage and stimulate us as we run this race of faith.

But on other occasions, that's not the case. Sometimes there's suffering and loss. Faith in Jesus Christ does not guarantee immunity from trouble and distress.

Beware those who say that it does. suffering and pain are not a sign of the failure of faith.

[9 : 19] At times, that's quite the reverse. And that is what these Hebrew Christians were discovering. God has set a race before us if you're a Christian believer tonight.

How are you running the race of faith? There's a race set before us. Second thing, there are witnesses that surround us in this race.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. The use of the athletic games metaphor has led many to conclude that the great cloud of witnesses mentioned here are in fact a great crowd of witnesses.

They believe these witnesses are like spectators watching from the stand. And there may be something in that, but I don't think that is the dominant picture here at all.

It is a cloud of witnesses, not a crowd of witnesses. These men of women of faith in Hebrews 11 are witnesses, not of those running the race of faith now, but rather witnesses to God's great faithfulness.

[10 : 31] The Greek word used here is a word from which we get our word martyr. In the race of faith, we are not alone. There are those who have gone before us, whose lives bear testimony to God's, to God's saving and keeping power.

And we are to draw strength from the faithful testimony of those who have gone ahead of us. These men and women are not dead examples, they are living witnesses.

though they have died, yet they still speak. And their testimony and witness is this, that the life of faith is worth it.

Sometimes, and I imagine that was the case for these Hebrew Christians, sometimes the kind of question that confronts us as Christians is, you know, is it worth it?

we may face the challenge to give ourselves wholeheartedly and completely to God, but we wonder, will it be worth it?

[11 : 43] And then we get to catch a glimpse of Abel and his life and witness is that it is surely worth it. The commendation of God is worth everything and anything.

we may ask, is it really worthwhile to walk with God, even if it means there are places I can't go and things I shouldn't do?

And Enoch's testimony is yes, for the walk of faith leads to life. We ask ourselves, is the gospel really true?

Is there really a place of protection from the coming wrath and judgment of God? And Noah reminds us that when the storm of God's wrath comes, there is a place of safety for sinners.

And God is slow to reveal His purposes in our lives when nothing seems to be making sense. Is it worth waiting? Is it worth persevering? Is it worth being patient?

[12 : 50] And Abraham stands and he says yes. Is faith worth it when it means the loss of wealth or status or career? Moses tells us that it is worth losing even the treasures of an empire to know and serve and worship Jesus Christ.

And what then about suffering and death? The martyrs rise, their lives testifying that even suffering and loss and death are worth it to be found as men and women in Jesus Christ.

Here is the church of the past speaking to the church of today. Wonderful solidarity between God's people down through the ages, the communion of saints, the church triumphant, the great company of the redeemed, leaning over the ramparts of heaven and encouraging us to stay on course, to stay on track.

The dead are not dead to us. They are alive. They are encompassed about us. This great cloud is there not to applaud us, but to exhort us.

Their presence is a summons to run the race of faith. That's why it's so important that we are, as we were thinking this morning, students of Scripture.

[14 : 22] Yes, sometimes we can read Christian biographies, and sometimes one can feel quite inadequate. Often faults and failings are kind of glossed over.

It's not the case with Scripture, is it? Noah, Abraham, Moses, David. We discover how patient God was with His people of old.

God's strength made perfect amid all their human frailties and weakness. The biblical record of their lives and their achievements confirms to us that persevering faith is always worth it, because it issues in great reward.

And this great cloud of witnesses encourages us then to keep on running the race of faith. There's a race set before us.

There are witnesses that surround us. Third thing, there are things that hinder us. Let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

[15 : 40] Those running the race of faith must be vigilant in casting off anything that would hinder their progress. Again, the imagery most likely borrowed from the rigorous discipline and training of those competing in the ancient athletic arena.

Contestants in these ancient games trained under very, very strict rules. Thirty days before the games began, they came together under close supervision. They exercised regularly.

They followed a strict regime in order to be able to compete. Weight was kept to a minimum.

Anything likely to impede their progress was cast aside. And the idea here is that the Christian disciple must likewise throw off or cast aside anything that might slow him or her down in the race of faith.

Those ancient athletes carried nothing with them in the race. They ran naked because they didn't want to be held back in any way. And the Christian must travel light in the race of faith.

Our writer, you'll notice, mentions these two things likely to slow a believer down in this race. And the first of these is what he calls weight. Lay aside, he says, every weight.

[17 : 04] Of course, there are weights in life that have to be carried. Family and work responsibilities, maybe health problems and challenges as we advance in years.

That's not what's in view here. In effect, the weight that's being referred to is the weight of an idol, really.

The excess baggage of those things that draw from us, that energy and commitment and love, that should be for our Savior.

They restrict our usefulness for God. They hold us back from making progress, from growing.

Hinder and they handicap us in making it difficult for us to be effective disciples of Jesus.

forgiveness. You know, sometimes we can hold on to things very, very tightly in the Christian life, good things. Sometimes even ministries, we can hold on to them.

[18 : 12] Instead of holding them lightly, we're grasping them so tightly. Sometimes they need to be laid aside. the love of ease, the desire for respectability, an excessive fondness for worldly comforts.

How foolish we can be when we pick up these burdens, these unhelpful entanglements that are likely to trip us up or slow us down with their weight.

And then the second thing mentioned here, of course, is sin itself. which we're told clings so closely. NIV, I think, puts it the sin that so easily entangles.

Sin is a crippling hindrance to running the race of faith. And the idea here is of something that would trip up the runner, cause them to stumble or fall.

Sin is to be put away. It's to be thrown off. It's to be discarded. Running the race of faith means really a lifelong struggle or battle with sin. In the race of faith, we're constantly, every day, we are to be throwing off sin.

[19 : 33] This is what Christians of a previous generation knew as mortification, putting sin to death. We need to understand whether we're a young Christian, whether we've been a Christian for many, many years.

There is no quick fix in dealing with sin. There's no magic wand that we can wave that will eradicate it. And those that peddle such experiences and teachings around the churches do incalculable harm to the spiritual well-being of many.

Sinful attitudes, actions, patterns of behavior are to be continually and ruthlessly dealt with. Sin is not to be cuddled, it's not to be caressed, it's not to be fondled, it's to be discarded.

Remember Paul writing to the Colossians, Colossians 3 5, he says, put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.

And that means there are things that have to be put off. We actually have to do that. They're not going to be taken from us in this life.

[20 : 55] Pornographic images need to be put away. Programs or films that are a stumbling block, maybe the TV package has to be terminated, the internet or phone account restricted.

Remember Jesus' words, and if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

Ah, yes, of course. By itself doing these things is never enough to avoid sin. Because the problem is not on the computer screen or TV or the phone line.

Of course, the problem is in the heart. And that's why just saying no is never enough.

Self-discipline, moral effort, yes, they are required.

But on their own, they're never enough. We need what Thomas Chalmers called the expulsive power of a new affection. Our hearts have to be taken up, captivated, enthralled by something bigger and greater and more wonderful.

[22 : 13] Because the ultimate antidote to lust or pride, selfishness, is the love of Jesus Christ. The love that He demonstrates for us on the cross.

And that's the one thing that God has in a sense in unlimited supply. He alone has the love to forgive and the power to forgive our darkest sins, to satisfy our deepest desires.

And as we will see in a moment, we need to be looking to Jesus. He is to be our great desire, our great delight, our first and greatest love. There's a race set before us.

There are witnesses that encompass us. And there are things that hinder us and need to be put aside. Fourthly, there's an attitude that must characterize us.

And let us run with endurance, some translations perseverance, the race set before us. Again, the race in mind here is not a quick sprint, be over in a few seconds, something more akin to a long-distance race, a marathon, a cross-country.

[23 : 34] And it's this kind of race, of course, that requires perseverance and endurance. To finish such a race, race takes a degree of mental toughness, takes focus, takes determination.

And the word here used, conveys this idea of pressing on even as things become difficult, like running into a headwind. There's resistance, there's opposition to be faced.

These things make progress in the race hard and difficult. Sometimes the wind isn't at our backs. We're not always running downhill.

I have a memory from many years ago here in Edinburgh. I ran in a competition, and it was a national boys' brigade cross-country race.

I must have been about, I guess, 17 or 18 years of age, so that wasn't yesterday, let me tell you. And the course was set on Arthur's seat, and if anybody knows about cross-country here in Scotland, they always run it in January.

[24 : 47] That's where it's always run. I have no idea why they do that, but it's always run in January. So you can imagine the weather was awful. It was cold, there was snow, there was sleet falling, and we had to complete, I think, a couple of laps of this course, and I remember after the first lap of the course, as the wind and the snow stung my face and my legs, I can remember it so vividly, I seriously thought, I'm just going to jack this in.

I'm heading for a warm shower before anyone else gets there. I'm giving up. But I didn't want to let the rest of the team down.

I'd started, and so I would finish. I didn't win a medal, I didn't win a prize, but I completed the course. And sometimes the race of faith is like that.

It can be hard, it can be uncomfortable, tough and testing, it's tempting just throwing the towel. But this race, in this race, we need to have the right attitude.

We need to take the long term view. It will be a test of our staying power. On occasions, we will have to run through the pain barrier.

[26 : 10] We will have to keep on going. It's not all going to be sunshine and light winds. We will feel the wind in our face, but we will keep on keeping on.

there's a race set before us. There's witnesses that surround us. There are things that hinder us. There's an attitude that is to characterize us.

Fifthly, that fifth thing, and the most important thing, perhaps of all, there's a person who inspires us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Where does the strength come from to run the race with endurance? Where do we obtain the resources that we need to keep on keeping on?

Is it a case that we grin and bear it? We try harder? We pull our socks up. No, the strength that we need comes from only one source, and that is from Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the author and finisher of faith, the one who stands at the beginning and the end of the Christian life, and indeed at all points in between.

[27 : 47] The verb that's used here is a striking one. It means to look away from everything else in order to fix the eyes intently on a single object.

Away from the spectators, away from the other runners, away from the difficulties of the course, away even from self. Look to Jesus.

Moffat translates the verse very helpfully, with no eyes for anyone or anything except Jesus. It's easy, so easy, to become distracted, to fix our gaze elsewhere, to think that progress in the race of faith is really down to us, our abilities, to think that it's all about how we compare or match up to others around us.

How many Christians spend their time thinking about others, how they're doing, what others think of them? Small wonder that when we fix our gaze elsewhere, we find ourselves stumbling or being tripped up.

Small wonder that when we take our eyes off Jesus, that we begin to run out of steam. Look at the words the writer uses here to describe Jesus.

[29 : 05] First, there's a Greek word, archehos, a word that was used in classical Greek. It referred to the great heroes that founded their ancient cities.

Sometimes in English we might talk about a Founders' Day, reference often to a school maybe or an organization, the Boys' Brigade. I remember we always had a Founders' Day parade at the end of October for William Alexander Smith.

The founder is not only the person who started the organization or school, they're the person whose example is meant to serve as a model, as a stimulus to those who follow.

And yet that word can also be used in a slightly different sense, reflected in some other translations that translate the word pioneer, someone who leads, inspires others to follow after them, a trailblazer, someone who goes ahead and opens up the way for others to follow, like we might think of the great explorers of the past, blazed a trail into uncharted, unmapped, unknown territories, opening up continents, and others followed after them.

They were pioneers, they were archeos. Earlier in the letter, the writer calls Jesus the archeos, the pioneer of our salvation. But whatever the idea that we take there, the idea is basically the same.

[30 : 33] The Christian faith does not originate with us, but with Jesus. He is the one upon whom our faith is founded. We believe in Him, we trust in Him, we follow Him, we fix our eyes on Him.

He is the one who stands at the very center of our faith and our lives. It's through Jesus that we come to faith. He is the one who establishes faith in our hearts.

Paul tells the Philippians, He who began a good work in you. And so we mustn't take our eyes from Him. The other words that's used here in this verse to describe Jesus is another Greek word, teleos, finisher, perfecter.

It comes from a Greek word, telos. It means the end or the goal or the purpose. The form it has here, it has the idea of completer, the one who finishes, who completes a job of work.

Jesus finished the work that His Father gave Him to do. On the cross, He cried out, it is finished. He is the one who brings faith to consummation.

[31 : 45] And the path that Jesus has set out for us does not end or finish in a dead end. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross and scorned its shame.

And there's a great paradox there, isn't it? The deepest sorrow, the highest joy, found in that same place, the cross of Jesus Christ. For Jesus, His joy lay in the redemption of His people, in the vindication of His Father's righteousness, in the conquest of Satan, in the drawing of death's sting, in the bringing of many sons to glory, in His enthronement at the right hand of the majesty on high, all the terrible horrors of the cross swallowed up, as it were, by the joy that was set before Him.

Now He's seated at the right hand of the Father, the race over, the struggle past, the victory won. And from His throne He looks upon us and He tells us that the way is open, open to the guilty and open to the weak and open to the weary, open to sinners.

The way to God is now guaranteed. The road has been built, and from His throne He beckons us to look, to come to Him and to trust Him.

[33 : 09] Because it's in looking to Jesus that we begin the Christian life. It's in looking to Jesus that we continue in the Christian life. And it's in seeing Jesus that lies at the end of the Christian life.

Christianity is Christ. And if you want to explore the Christian faith, you must consider Jesus. You may want to talk about the dinosaurs and the age of the earth and the problem of evil and all of these things.

But ultimately, if you want to wrestle and to come to terms with Christianity, you have to come to terms with Jesus Christ. His life, His teaching, His claims, His death, His resurrection.

If you want to grow as a Christian, you need to keep looking to Jesus. Corrie was reminding us of that this morning. Puritan Richard Sibbes writes, Hold your eyes on Jesus that you might develop a stronger appetite for Him.

Maybe you're someone who's worried this evening about the future. I meet lots of people who are anxious about the future. Not just their own future, the future of the nation, society, culture.

[34 : 38] Jesus knows the future. He has shaped it. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. Look to Him.

Or maybe you're fearful, afraid, afraid of death. Maybe you wouldn't admit that to others, but deep down, you're scared. Jesus has conquered death and drawn its sting.

Fix your eyes on Him. Look to Him. Maybe you're somewhere tonight and you're weighed down with a guilty conscience. Things in your past that you think, I could never be forgiven for that.

Let me tell you that the blood of Jesus can make the foulest clean. The precious blood of Christ can clean anything and anyone.

Look to Him. Or maybe you're deeply insecure, driven, your sense of worth bound up with what you're achieving or doing, never really happy unless you've got this or that or the other thing, and

nothing really satisfies.

[35 : 49] Let me tell you that Jesus Christ is more than enough to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. Set your heart on Jesus.

Maybe tonight you're lonely, isolated. Maybe you've lost someone very close to you. Who is Jesus? He is, as we come to the season of that, He's Emmanuel.

He's God with us. Look to Him. Or if you're tired and weary and feeling like giving up and throwing in the towel, here's someone who faced far more than you have ever done, and yet never gave up, never lost heart.

Consider Him, it says, verse 3, who endured from sinners such hostility against himself that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. One commentator points out Aristotle uses the words for growing weary and losing heart of an athlete.

He flings himself to the ground after he surged past the winning post of the race. The writer is saying to us, don't give up.

[37 : 00] Don't relax before the winning line. Don't collapse until the race is over. Keep on your feet. Keep running to the end. I began speaking of Eric Liddell, best known, of course, for famous victory in the 1924 Olympic Games.

But Liddell was a runner in a far more significant race, in this race of faith. He turned his back on fame and fortune to become a missionary in China.

He finished his race at the age of just 43 in a Japanese internment camp at the end of the Second World War. How did he do it?

What was his secret? He looked to Jesus. His soul was anchored in Jesus. He patterned his life on Jesus Christ. By God's grace, may that be true of us tonight.

May we too be found looking to the only one who can carry us to the finishing line. Let's remember the witnesses that surround us.

[38 : 11] Let's throw off those things that would hinder us. Let's make sure that endurance is the attitude that characterizes us. But first and foremost, let's make sure that we're looking to the one who inspires us, who can carry us, and who can keep us.

Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of faith. Let's pray together. Lord, grant us your grace and your mercy.

Help us by your Holy Spirit that we may fix the eyes of faith, not upon ourselves or indeed upon others, but upon our Lord Jesus Christ.

How we thank you for him. We thank you for the beauty of his life and death and resurrection. We thank you for the beauty of his person.

We thank you that he is a wonderful savior, one who never lets us down. Lord, encourage us, strengthen us.

[39 : 22] You know our circumstances and you know our situations this evening. You know the worries that beset us. those who do you