

A Cloud of Witnesses
Spillman Memorial Baptist Church
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
November 5, 2023

Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

Purpose: We all are on a journey of faith. In order to succeed we need to divest ourselves of those things that hinder us and put away those sins that ensnare and entangle us. We need to run the race set before us and we need to focus on Jesus. When we consider what Jesus did for us, we will complete our course with perseverance and patience.

Susan hated the idea of surgery. She was very upset when the doctor informed her that she needed a tonsillectomy.

After much deliberation, Susan decided to go ahead and have the procedure.

While she and the nurse were filling out an admission form, she was so nervous she couldn't think straight or hardly speak. The nurse, being a compassionate sort, patted her hand and said, "Don't worry. This is a simple medical procedure, and a problem that can easily be fixed."

"I am sure you are right. I'm being silly," Susan said, "Please continue."

"Good," the nurse went on, "Now, do you have a living will?"¹



None of us want to hear that question just prior to surgery!
It is a slap in the face, a cold blast of water from the shower head, a bee sting that bites and lingers with its pain.

But death is just as much a reality as life is. We can ignore it, attempt to postpone it, try and delay the inevitable, but as the scripture says, in Psalm 90 it will come. *“The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.”*

Yes, we need a living will – but we also need to have a dying will.

My sermon this morning is taken from Hebrews chapter twelve. The previous chapter, chapter 11 is commonly called by many people as the Faith’s Hall of Fame.



In chapter eleven, we find

- ... the faith of Abel who offered a better sacrifice,
- ... Enoch who walked with God and then was not,
- ... Noah who built an ark out of obedience to what God instructed,
- ... Abraham who left his home country to go to a place God would show him, and
- ... Sarah who trusted God at the age of 90 to bear a son, Isaac.
- ... We read of Abraham’s trust in God and how he was willing to sacrifice his only son simply because he trusted God.
- ... We hear the retelling of the faith of Moses as he leads the people of Israel out of Egypt,

... the faith of Joshua who led the people to march around the city of Jericho,
... and we even read of the faith of Rahab the harlot that hid the Hebrew spies when they came to spy out the land.

But that was not all that are included in the hall of fame of faith. Even though their names are not listed, thousands, if not millions, have died facing severe persecution for their faith in God. I am sure those names are being recorded by God every year which, if included, could be included in this section of those called faithful.



Sadly, and quietly, around the world today, numerous churches are being burned to the

ground simply because they worship our Lord Jesus Christ. Systematically around the world, Christians are putting their lives on the line, not wavering in their faith, as they are being murdered in places like Pakistan, India, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt. With the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, we have heard of countless Christians being murdered, raped, burned alive, and beheaded. It appears our country is doing very little to stop the slaughter of Christians around the world! We need to be praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

Religious persecution – especially antisemitism – is on the rise with the recent conflict between Hamas and Israel. It is a difficult time in



our world today. We need to spend time in prayer for our country and those around the world facing the difficulties of persecution and war.

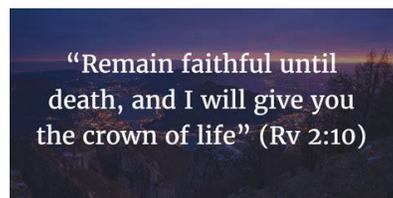
Chapter twelve of Hebrews was given to the small house church in Rome to encourage them to remain faithful to the very end. The writer of Hebrews gives us a scene of a great coliseum. I can picture it much like the great arenas of America's sporting events. In the portals of Heaven, there is a tremendous host of people gathered to watch and see how the faithful – You and I – which are still alive are running our race.



For you see, the faithful Heavenly host that are gathered – watching us – have already finished their race. They have finished their course. They have done what they could while they were alive and now, they are watching us. Those gathered there in that “*cloud of witnesses*” are the great spiritual athletes of the past. They are a part of those great Hall of Faith members – all of which are gold medal winners. Hebrews 11:4 says this concerning Abel, “*though he being dead still speaks.*” The works of an individual will continue to live on.

A Jewish writer once said, “Some people are physically alive but their actions are such that they act as if they are already dead. While others that are physically dead, their lives live on in what they have left behind.”

As you are standing here on the race track of life, you look up in



that great arena, you will find individuals that are nodding their head saying, “**I did it, and so can you. You can do it. You can stick it out and be faithful.**” So, you look back at the track that lies in front of you, and realize the prize is not for the one that finishes first, it goes to the one that finishes the race well. Ecclesiastes 9:11 says, “*The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.*” (9:11)

How can you and I finish the race set before us and do it well?

Divest!²

R. Kent Hughes in his commentary on Hebrews suggests the first step in being successful in this race is to divest. The word “divest” means to get rid of something. It means to no longer hold on to something. It is the opposite of investing.



Verse one says, “*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.*” This divestment is one in which every weight that might slow up our progress is removed. Athletes may train using weights to build up endurance, but once the race has begun those weights are removed. Even today, athletes use the lightest shoes they can find and the thinnest material in which their uniforms can be made. These things can hinder so the writer of Hebrews says we are to get rid of these hindrances.

Divest Sin

But the writer also says we need to get rid of those sins that can so easily ensnare and entangle us. A runner cannot run if his shoelaces are tied together. A cyclist cannot compete if there is no air in the tires. A pole-vaulter cannot jump if his pole is cracked and broken. You and I cannot succeed in the race set before us if we continue to cling to those things that ensnare us.



The most sobering aspect of this passage in Hebrews is that it speaks to the “*sin that so easily entangles us.*” Each of us has a tendency or weakness in a certain area. Some older translations interpret this passage as a “*besetting sin.*” We each have a characteristic sin that more easily entangles us more than others. Some sins can captivate and ensnare us while others don’t bother us at all.

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A besetting sin is a sin by which one is easily captured. It seems to have the ability to surround us at will. It is a sin...

Which one is the one that ensnares you?

Covetousness?	Envy?	Criticism?
Laziness?	Hatred?	Lust?
Unthankfulness?	Pride?	Adultery?
Drunkenness?	Stealing?	Gossip?

Whatever sin is the one that grabs hold of you, it must be stripped away and left behind as we lean forward in the race set before us.

Divest Hindrances

When we begin to remove things that prevent us from being found faithful, we



know our sins must be left behind. But there are often things in our lives that are not a sin, but they have become a hindrance to us. They weigh us down.

What may be a hindrance for one individual may not be a hindrance to another person. A hindrance is something that weighs you down spiritually. It could be a friendship, an association, an event, a place, a habit, a pleasure, an entertainment, an honor. But if these things that may be good are weighing you down, you need to be willing to strip them away and lay them aside in order to run the race set before you.

If going to a certain place brings you back into a lifestyle you don’t need to be involved with, then don’t go to those places anymore. If seeing a person causes you to harbor anger or even lust, then avoid that person. Set your mind on the race before you and don’t let those other items hinder you and ensnare you.

We need to knowingly admit our weaknesses and surrender them to God. We need to sit aside our sins and our hindrances in order to complete the race well.

Run!

Once we have properly divested ourselves of these hindrances, the scripture tells us to RUN. Like Jennie told Forest Gump, we are to RUN! We are to “*run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*”

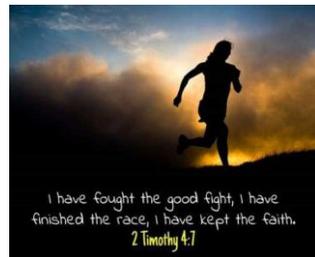
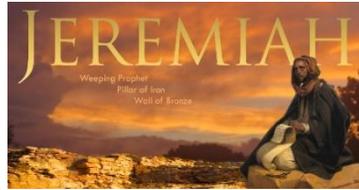


Run the Course

Each of us has set before us a specific course mapped out. Each person’s course is unique and special. Some roads are

straight and fairly level. Others may be full of hills and obstacles. Some courses are shorter than others. But all of us are called to run with perseverance.

In the Old Testament, we find a prophet of God named Jeremiah. This man was called by God to give a message of repentance to the people of Israel. No one repented. He was beaten, scolded, put in prison, dumped in a well, mocked, and treated with scorn. In spite of how he was treated, he was called to a certain task and he remained faithful. Jeremiah may have lamented about his task, but his hope was in God.



The Apostle Paul felt discouraged and defeated at times. But towards the end of his life, he could proudly say to his friend and co-laborer Timothy, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”* (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

Isn't that a great epitaph! The examples listed in Hebrews chapter eleven, are the examples of people that succeeded in the race of life. They may have failed many times. But in the end, they completed the task set before them. We can take great comfort in knowing we can too.

Run with Perseverance

The secret to success in this race is to do it with perseverance.



William Barkley described perseverance as: “That determination, un-hasting un-resting, un-hurrying and yet un-delaying, which goes steadily on, and which refuses to be deflected. Obstacles will not daunt it; delays will not depress it; discouragements will not take its hope away. It will halt neither for discouragement from within nor without.”

In the 1986 New York City Marathon, almost 20,000 runners entered the race. What is memorable is not who won, but who finished last. His name was



Bob Wieland. He finished 19,413th—dead last. Bob completed the New York marathon in 4 days, 2 hours, 47 minutes, and 17 seconds. It was unquestionably the slowest marathon in history—ever. So, what is it that made Bob Wieland's marathon so special? Bob ran with his arms. 17 years earlier while in Vietnam, Bob's legs were blown off in battle. He sits on a 15-pound saddle and covers his fists with pads. He uses his arms to catapult himself forward one arm-length at a time. He can run a mile in an hour. That is real endurance in the face of adversity.³

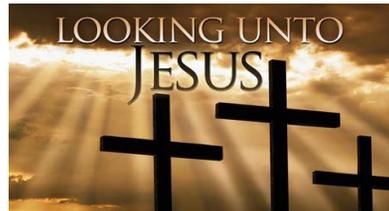
The Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit. I want to run all the way with the flame of my torch still lit for Him.⁴

It is within our reach to finish. The race of life is not for sprinters, it is for the person that continues to plod along, fast or slow. We all are called to persevere.

Focus! Focus on Jesus

Now that we have stripped away all those sins and hindrances that can hinder us from our race, and now that we have determined in our heart to persevere until the end, we need to turn our attention to verse two.

“Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”



The writer of Hebrews has chosen the word “Jesus” for us to focus upon instead of the word “Christ.” The word Jesus reminds us of our Lord’s human side. Jesus walked in the flesh and fulfilled His ministry and calling on earth while in the flesh. This reminds us that Jesus is the *“author and finisher of our faith.”* Jesus knew and understood the will of His Father and set His face towards completing the task before Him – the task of the cross.

He was there when God wrote out the plan of Salvation offered to mankind, and He was the one that saw to it that it would be completed. Not only did Jesus author it, He fulfilled it. Even if it meant going to the cross, Jesus did it in order for you and me to be restored back into fellowship with God. Our sinful nature prevents us from redeeming ourselves. We need a Savior and His name is Jesus.

F. F. Bruce said, “If Jesus had come down by some supernatural power, He would never have been hailed as the ‘perfector of faith’ nor would He have left any practical example for others to follow.” But the truth of the matter is Jesus endured it all by faith.

You and I need faith in order to run the race set before us. We must *“fix our eyes upon Jesus”* and begin to run. We don’t need to be distracted by other things that may hinder us. We must continue to be found faithful.

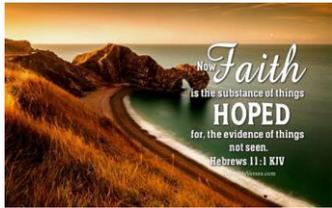
Focus on Jesus’ Attitude

When we focus on Jesus, we should consider His attitude. *“Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, scorning its shame.”* It was with JOY that Jesus went through the pain of the cross. It was with JOY that Jesus endured the scorn and shame.



He was able to do this with JOY because He saw the prize at the end. That prize was you and me. He was able to endure the cross because He wanted you and me to be reunited with Him once again. He endured the cross for us. The physical pain He endured was tremendous. But it was the spiritual pain that we cannot comprehend.

Here was the Pure Spotless Lamb of God being offered as atonement for our sins. He bore the guilt of all of our sin and did it willingly. And now, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God – continuing to intercede on our behalf before a Holy, Just God. Jesus saw the JOY He would obtain as He honored His Father’s will. He saw the JOY of being seated there once again beside His Father.



Jesus lived his earthly life with the certainty that faith offers. Hebrews 11:1 says, “*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” Jesus

fixed his eyes on the unseen things in order to obtain the things hope for.

As we run our race, we realize we are encompassed by so great a cloud of witnesses. But we need to realize our race is as unto the Lord. We do not need to keep our eyes on those in the cloud of witnesses like Noah, Abraham, Moses. We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. As we do, we realize He is keeping His eye on us and is well pleased with us as we run the race set before us.

Consider!

As we move into verse three, we are called to Consider Jesus. “*For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.*”



As we run this race, we are to consider Jesus. Think about His determination and unwillingness to quit in the face of opposition. In another translation, we find it says, “*so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*” That phrase is related to an athlete that becomes so weary from the race that they grow faint and they lose the will or the heart to continue forward. Jesus has finished His course in order to be an example of faithfulness, steadfastness, and perseverance.

We are to become totally absorbed with Jesus. This requires our turning away from other things that hinder our

walk. It requires turning from those things and turning our eyes to Jesus. That is why we need to read the Gospel over and over.

That is why our worship should be Christ centered. That is why Christ is the measure of our faith.



If we believe we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, then their lives are to be shining examples of people that endured and obtained the prize.

- We can look at the patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- We can be taught from the prophets like Moses, Elijah, Samuel, Daniel, and Jeremiah.
- We can be encouraged by the Apostles like Peter, John, and Paul.
- We can identify with and be willing to walk the path of martyrs like Stephen, Polycarp, Cranmer, and Elliot.
- We can be motivated by missionaries like Lottie Moon, Annie Armstrong, and Fanny Heck.
- We can even be spurred on by our loved ones that have already finished their course.

All of these people that comprise the cloud of witnesses invite us to finish well.



We need to divest ourselves of all the hindrances and sins that keep us from finishing. Sometimes it will take a radical approach to removing these things – but we must if we are to succeed.

We need to **run** with patient perseverance the race that is set before us. Each of us is called and gifted differently. We need to try and discern the way God would have us to go and be willing to follow it wherever it leads.

We need to **focus** on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Jesus must become our sole focus as we run. If we forget why we are running, we will become discouraged and quit.

We must **consider** Jesus and how he lived a perfect sinless life, counting it all joy to complete the race before Him.

We are invited to journey with Jesus. Let us set out to finish our race well.

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ Mikey's Funnies, A Surgery Funny, Nov. 4, 2016

² Outline from R. Kent Hughes Commentary on Hebrews pages. 156-164

³ Sermon Central, by Ed Wood a retired Southern Baptist Minister, (accessed Nov. 4, 2016)

⁴ Sermon Central, Illustration by Evie Megginson of Union Springs Baptist Church (Accessed Nov. 4, 2016)