

LOOK TO JESUS-ENDURE THE CROSS

Hebrews 12: 1-6 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In our ongoing struggle for victory, do we recognize we live in occupied enemy territory? Our Creator and Redeemer made all things perfectly, but mankind fell into sin. God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, sacrificed His life to redeem us, and our world. Yet John the beloved disciple, reminds us of our continued position on earth, in I John 5: 19. He wrote, “We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” In this sanctuary, battles are raging, battles in our hearts and lives for purity, holiness, and righteous living. We all have enemies--the world, the flesh, and the devil! We each have our own flesh crying out to us like a child wanting our old life back—as a child demanding a candy bar at Walmart. The world, including the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life is trying to drag us down every day. Our enemy, the devil is trying to make sure our lives don’t go according to God’s plan. Every believer faces sin as a wrestling match. Paul tells us, in Ephesians 6: 12, not against flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” In our text on the cross today, from Hebrews 12: 1-6, the Lord is calling us as His Bride, and each of us individually, to run our own race for Jesus, the race that is set before us.

Each of us have a divine purpose as born-again believers. We have—God’s race “set before us.” Paul wrote in Ephesians 2: 10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Romans 12: 2 tells us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing, you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Romans 8: 28 tells us “we are called according to His purpose.” God has a purpose in this race set before us. This path/race is not a sprint, or a weekend trip to the mountains. This path is individual and pre-planned, pre-ordained from the foundation of the world. It is our life-long marathon. David reassures us in Psalm 139: 16 that God saw our unformed substance prior to our birth; in His book were written every one of them, the days that were formed for us, when as-yet, there was none of them.”

Julie Ackerman Link, in her “100 Prayers Inspired by the Psalms.” wrote “Lord, it is natural to criticize and not to praise. May we energize each other with legitimate praise rather than paralyze each other with unfair criticism. Give us love for those who betray us, patience with those who criticize us, and compassion for those who are so focused on everything that is wrong, that they are unable to enjoy all that is good.” I call us today to go to the cross; to find the way God has set before us, so we can run our race Home to the throne where Jesus is seated at the Father’s right hand. Here is how—seven ways!

TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST STUDY THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES WHO HAVE FINISHED THE RACE BEFORE US. (I.) v.

1a – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”
Whoever wrote Hebrews, be it Barnabas, Paul, Apollos, or another writer, this scene before us is an athletic scene, a carry over from chapter 11 that suggests an athletic event. The Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith includes thousands of people, but only 13 men are named—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, + two women—Sarah and Rahab, the once prostitute. This is not an exhaustive list as we all have to say, but what about—Job, Caleb, Joshua, Jonathan, Boaz, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and women like Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Moses’ mother, Jochebed, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Ruth, Naomi, and Esther. Who is this cloud of witnesses? We must study this cloud and realize the athletic picture of former Hall of Faith believers who have joined the 15 named specifically in Hebrews 11. By faith, I see Billy Graham there, Vance Havner, Charles Spurgeon, D. L. Moody, Adoniram Judson, Martin Luther, Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Stephen, the first martyr, Joseph, Mary, Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, Mary Magdalene, and yes, I see my Mom and Dad. There are so many finishers of this race cheering us on that the writer calls them a cloud of witnesses. Yes, some are martyrs like John Hus, Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, and their three other missionaries martyred by the Auca Indians, Polycarp, William Tyndale, Betsy Ten Boom, John Wycliffe, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The Greek word for cloud is **nephos** meaning a shapeless mass covering the heavens, metaphorically a dense multitude, a throng of witnesses. The word for witness is **martus**. It stands for one who testifies in a court of law, or one who bears witness by his life, his lips, or his death, or one who stands up for what he has seen and heard and knows to be true from God’s Word.

All those before us recognized they each had a race to run specifically, a race set before them, marked out for them. Whether we are walking or running, Paul said in Ephesians 2: 10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Beloved, our temptation is to run another’s race or to try to. Think of the apostle Peter in John 21: 18-19. We read, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This He said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” “Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against Him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is My will that he remains, until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” I hear you saying—how do I know about my race, and how I am to

run it for God. God said to Moses, “What’s that in your hand?” Moses said, “It’s just a rod.” “Throw it on the ground.” It became a miracle of God—now a snake, later “Hold your rod over the Red Sea.” God parted the waters. Moses lost his debate with God. You will lose your debates—Run the race set before you. 2ndly,

TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT AND SIN WHICH CLINGS SO CLOSELY TO US. (II.) v. 1b – “let

us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...” Now let’s back up and speak of this race a bit. You’ve seen a runner take off his or her jacket and their running pants. Athletes for centuries have trained for running with running weights strapped on their arms and legs. When I used to throw shot-put in college, we used heavier balls than 16 pounds just like baseball players use weights that circle their bats and they practice with weighted bats. But for competition, those weights used to train hard must be laid aside. Which sins must we lay aside? The writer tells us—the one which clings or sticks to us, the one that we excuse as that’s just who I am. Have any of you fed hummingbirds lately? We used to do it. You will see the sin which easily besets hummingbirds. They continually battle for position. There are four stations around most feeders, four places at the table, but the moment one hummingbird takes its place, the fight is on for that place the other hummingbird is using. There is as much syrupy food at each of the four places, but the hummingbirds want to be at the table alone. They’re sin as is true for many of us—they want control. They want to take over. Their greediness is enough to make us all shake our heads. Do we want the place at God’s table that someone else has, even though we know God has enough for all of us? Do we begrudge a fellow church member, a spouse, a friend at work or others a station in life we want all to ourselves? Are we blind to our own desire to always be right, insisting others back down where we see them as wrong? Did you know the sin which so easily besets us or clings to us is a problem we are the author of—it’s often of our own making. Problems that slow down our race are often consequences of wrong choices. You could say like a golfer—each of us have our handicap. But we cannot reach our goal with self-indulgent habits tied to us, with associations which tie us back, or with controlling sins which we have not shed ourselves from.

Let’s be personal a few moments. Are there health problems in our lives because we are being self-indulgent and gluttonous or binging and refusing to exercise? Are there neighbor problems because we don’t reach out to them and because we are on their backs about boundaries, noise, and our imposed rules for how they are to mow their grass? Are there problems in our marriage because of our critical spirit, our nagging tongue, and our lording it over our spouse? Are there problems at work because of our laziness or our dishonesty? Are there problems in our family because of our jealousy, resentments and bitterness? Are there problems in our peace of mind because we have turned down a call from God to obey Him, and held on to our autonomy saying, “Lord, that’s just not who I am!”? Thirdly,

**TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST WITH ENDURANCE
LOOK TO JESUS, THE FOUNDER AND PERFECTOR OF OUR FAITH.**

(III.) vs. 1c-2a – “and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...” The whole theme of our text is endurance. The recipients of this letter were Jewish believers who were getting weary and they were giving up. As Winston Churchill’s cry to England was during World War II, he said, over and over, “Never give up!” The famous speech where Winston Churchill spoke of never giving up was delivered at Harrow School on October 29, 1941. Many of Churchill’s speeches were memorable, but this speech is most remembered for the lines that start, “...never give in, never give in, never, never, never - in nothing, great or small, large or petty - never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.” Never give up! We are called to run our race with endurance, not dropping out of the course, but finishing the course for God and His church. What makes us never give up? It is only by our focus that we can keep going in our race—looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith. Our Lord endured more, far more than any of us or any of our greatest heroes. He endured the cross.

In our Christian race, we have (1) **a goal set for us.** We are not strollers, wayfarers, tourists, but pilgrims on our journey. Every day, we would do well to ask ourselves, “Are we getting any farther along to our journey Home to Jesus? In the Christian race, (2) **we have our inspiration,** first from the cloud of witnesses, but most importantly from **looking unto Jesus,** the founder and perfecter of our faith, the author and finisher of our faith, and we run the fastest not by looking back, looking around, but by looking to Jesus. This word for endurance is **hupomone.** It means steadfast endurance. Notice what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean sitting down and accepting whatever comes. It doesn’t mean resigning ourselves and letting the tide wash us away. It means the patience endurance which masters things by going steadily forward, refusing to be deflected by bad news, or daunted by obstacles, or depressed by delays, or discouraged by hopelessness. Our focus is to be Jesus from here to Glory. As Jesus is our goal and inspiration, (3) **He is also our example.** To win our salvation, Jesus had to abandon for His earthly lifetime, Heaven’s Glory. He had to turn down earth’s triumphs by taking the way of the cross. But beyond Jesus as our goal, our inspiration, (4) **Jesus is our continual Presence.** Jesus is more than the goal of our journey. He is our daily companion along the way. Jesus is the One we go to meet, and the One with whom we travel, ever practicing the Presence of the Lord Jesus. It’s not, “What would Jesus do?” but “What is Jesus helping me do for His glory?” Fourthly,

**TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST SEE THE JOY SET
BEFORE JESUS THAT MADE HIM ENDURE THE CROSS.** (IV.) v. 2b –

“who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross.” We so easily forget

to focus not just on our Lord Jesus, but we must focus on the joy on His face, on His marred visage. We were, as the Bride of Christ, Jesus' glory and joy. Watch a husband to be in waiting at the front of the church when we as pastors say, "All rise!" I tremble for the man who is looking down at his shoe-laces, or the man looking around at the crowd. Trouble is ahead for that dear young man. Look at a husband to be, in love. He looks to the back and watches the door open. He sees a Daddy holding the arm of his beloved daughter. And this young man's eyes are fixed—that is the race set before him that day. It isn't time to be texting a friend about an upcoming fishing trip. It isn't time to check how Tiger Woods is doing in the Master's Tournament. It isn't time to be checking Wyoming Road and Travel. No, his eyes are on or they had better be on his lovely, cherished beautiful, beloved bride to be. Nothing should cloud that vision. How could Jesus see past the mocking, the scourging, the ripping out of his precious beard, the holocaust of the angry thorn-crowned wreath mashed into His head, the rusty spikes being driven into His trembling hands and feet. How did He keep praying for the centurion and his soldiers, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!"? How? Above Jesus unparalleled suffering at crucifixion was what He saw beyond the suffering. It was more than pleasant. It was His joy. He saw the millions of lost sinners, you and me, redeemed by His shed blood. He saw His Father's face satisfied by His death as God's prescribed full penalty paid for our sins—making peace between us and His Father by the blood of His cross. He saw the new covenant of God's grace sealed unto the Day of redemption. He saw Himself beside us as our Mediator, and He saw the way open for the chief of all us sinners being saved from the wrath to come. He saw Himself at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb that's coming as the first-born among many brothers. He saw the consummation of the cross coming with an intimacy with us we can only imagine, coming soon—and His joy was set. Beloved, as a bride that has her groom criticized, put down, mocked and cursed, if she is in love, she knows her man and her joy is fixed. Say what you will, she is vibrant with joy unspeakable. She will endure whatever is said, because she knows who is taking her to his side. Fifthly,

TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST DESPISE THE SHAME OF THE CROSS TO SEE JESUS AT THE FATHER'S RIGHT HAND. (V.)

v. 2c – "despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." The greatest obstacles of Calvary were the physical agony and the awful shame of the cross. The shame was despising the abandonment He knew was coming and it came when the Father put out all earthly lights for 3 hours, as He refused to look on our sin that Jesus carried. Oh, the cross and the shame. Jesus cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Oh, the shame as Jesus set His face to go to the cross, to finish His race! Jesus despised it. The shame included seeing His own disciples were not there to stand with him. They abandoned Him. The shame was the mockery. The shame was the wicked indecency of being stripped of His clothing and hanging there in nakedness for you and me. His shame was the torture

of feeling His earthly body given by God in His virgin birth, to feel His life ebb away as He groaned in a way He knew was coming, but that He had never known in earthly fullness until He finished His race for you and me. Jesus took our shame on Himself, so when we are ready to go hide our heads, and retreat from our race, so He could say, “Don’t run away. Don’t take your life. Look to me. I drank the full cup for you. With My help, cling to Me, drink the full cup for Me.” Sixthly,

TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST ENDURE HOSTILITY FROM SINNERS AGAINST US, SO WE DON’T GROW FAINTHEARTED.

(VI.) v. 3-4 – “Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” Beloved, we do have a race set for us. Don’t give up too soon. Don’t relax before you cross the finish line. Don’t collapse until you feel the tape break. Stay on your feet until you get to the end. For the readers of this epistle, the writer of Hebrews was saying, “Unlike Jesus, you have not yet been involved in a mortal struggle of losing your life, shedding your blood. You haven’t fought to the death, resisting to the point of blood.” So, don’t drift into lethargy, and don’t flinch in conflict. No, compare yourself with your Savior. Consider Him. How can we compare what we are going through with what He went through for us? He did all that for us. What will we do now for Him? Hymn, “I Gave My Life for Thee.” Seventhly and lastly,

TO RUN THE RACE SET BEFORE US, WE MUST REMEMBER GOD’S EXHORTATION TO REGARD HIS DISCIPLINE AS JESUS LOVING US.

(VII.) v. 5-6 – “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves and chastises every son whom He receives.’” Don’t you dare ever call your struggles God’s punishment of you. The punishment for our sins was paid for by Jesus at the cross. What God is using now on me and you is His will and desire to discipline us that we will share His holiness. He wants us to submit to His chastening hand. Seek to learn what God is trying to teach you. He loves us, and only by His loving discipline can we finish the race set before us. Don’t lose heart when God rebukes you. We live in a culture of victims, always blaming someone else. Stop it. God will use His rod and the consequences of our sin to train us and discipline us for His purpose. Thank Him. Why? He’s a good, good Father, that who He is! Know that if we are not disciplined, we are not saved. When someone says, “I’ve never been chastened by the Lord, I know that person needs to be saved. To claim to be saved, but to claim that God has nothing to chasten you for, is to be a proud, illegitimate child of His, a bastard, without God’s wedding garment. When His discipline comes through His own hand, or by the hand of one of His appointed servants, or by circumstances that bring you to your knees in tears, tell Him thanks, I needed correction. I love you, my dear Father. Oh, now—look to Jesus, endure the cross!