

Introduction

First let me welcome all the visitors here today, and also to welcome and congratulate all the mothers here this Mothers' Day. Someone wrote "A mother is an influence, an inspiration, a support, one who cares, one who understands, and one who provides her precious love and care, without any expectations." And Prov 31:28 says "Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."

Slide

So thank you for what you are doing, whether your children are 6 months old or 60 years old.

However this is not going to be a Mothers' Day message. Our sermon series this Spring has been on the book of Hebrews, with the theme "Enduring Faith"

Slide

and for the last three weeks we have been studying the lives of some of the great heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11; men like Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and women like Ruth. We turn today to Hebrews 12, but we need to remember that there were no chapter divisions in the original Greek text; our current chapter divisions were devised by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1207 – 1228. So in understanding Hebrews 12 we need to understand it in context with chapter 11. Let us then turn in our Bibles or on the screen to Hebrews 11:32

Slide

Heb 11:32-12:3

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, 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. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

Slide

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

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

Slide

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

NIV

Slide (blank)

Prayer

In these well-known verses the writer to the Hebrews uses the analogy of a race to describe the Christian life. "Let us run ... the race marked out for us". This message is for everyone who is a believer in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and it is especially relevant for those of you who are looking forward to graduating from High School or college over the next few days or weeks. How will you live your life next year as you face new challenges and new opportunities? So let us note the key teachings of this passage:

Slide

1. The Place of our race

Our Scripture tells us two things about the place.

Slide

a. The first one is that it we are not running alone; we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The image here is of a race, such as an Olympic marathon, where the runners are being cheered on by a huge crowd.

Slide

And who is in the crowd? It contains all the heroes of the faith who have gone before us. It includes Moses, Elijah, Rahab, Ruth, Noah, and Abraham. It includes great Christians of all times who have gone to be with the Lord: the apostles Peter and Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, D. L. Moody, John Stott, and others. If you were blessed with a Christian mother and she is now with the Lord, as I was, then she is there cheering you on. And it includes the Ethiopian Christians who were recently martyred by ISIS, as Chris reminded us last week.

Slide

So all of these believers, these men and women of faith, have run their race and have received the crown of glory, and now they are cheering us on as we run our own races. They are saying, in effect “We ran our race by God’s grace and power; he enabled us to be faithful to the end, and he will enable you too. What an encouragement!

“For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed, thy name O Jesus be forever blessed, Alleluia, Alleluia” Alleluia indeed!

Slide

b. The second thing we are told is that we are running the race God has designed for us. “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Heb. 12:1b) I find this very comforting: God has designed a race course individually for each of us. The courses for marathon races differ enormously from place to place:

Slide

Here for example are four different marathon courses; the three top ones are British courses, which tend to be circular or even figure 8 courses, and the bottom one is the Boston marathon course which is more or less linear. Each one is very different, but each one has a start and a finish. Some are hilly, some are relatively flat. Some run through pleasant hills and around lakes, while others run through urban streets. And it is like this with our lives.

Slide

For reasons we do not always understand, God has given some of us courses that go through difficult country, with rocky roads and suffering, while others are blessed with courses through green fields and lives of relative ease. But in either case, God has marked out this course for you. If you are struggling with difficulties in your life; loss of job, loss of health, loss of a loved one, take heart, because God has marked this out as part of your course and He loves you, and you are in His good hands. And if your life is one of blessing, don’t make the mistake of taking credit for this; God has marked this course out for you, and probably He has given you these blessings so you can be a blessing to others. He has marked out the race for you; take heart!

Slide

2. Our Preparation for our race.

The writer then goes on to tell us how to prepare for the race.

Slide

Heb. 12:1a “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 ... the race marked out for us.”

No one running in a race wears any more clothing than is necessary. It may be a cold day, so he or she steps up to the starting line wearing a sweater or warm-up suit, but when the race begins he or she takes off all excess clothing because it would be a hindrance in the race. Tech football players may be fast...

Slide

But you cannot run a marathon dressed like a football player; you need to throw off anything that hinders, like these Boston marathoners

Slide

So what does this mean to us? Our text mentions two kinds of things that need to be thrown off

Slide

a. *Let us throw off everything that hinders.* This refers to things which are not necessarily wrong in themselves, but which slow you down in your race. We need to ask ourselves the question “Is there anything in my life which hinders my walk with God? It may be a hobby which consumes all our free time, or an obsession with watching TV, or a pursuit of money, or a pursuit of worldly fame and glory, an obsession with sports or a dedication to work that verges workaholicism. Fear is another hindrance; if we fear to trust God it means we will not serve Him. Are you most afraid of death? Disease? Poverty? Loneliness? Rejection? Failure? Do you fear losing a loved one? A job? Your personal freedom? Some particular material possession? Do these fears keep you from doing the will of God? Perhaps fear of rejection hinders you from sharing your faith with non-Christians. Fear of failure may keep you from launching out in a new area of ministry. What are the hindrances in your life that keep you from following God wholeheartedly? Seek to throw them off by the strength and power of the Holy Spirit within you.

Slide

b. *Let us throw off ... the sin that so easily entangles*

Here the writer gets down to the basics; we cannot run the race of our lives for God if we are dragging a load of sin on our backs. So what are the sins that keep us from running? Basically anything that separates us from God. It could be whether one of the biggies in the 10 commandments: murder, stealing, lust, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, covetousness, etc. Or it could be an addiction to pornography, or to drugs or alcohol. But it could also be something much more subtle but therefore much more dangerous; the sin of unbelief. The book of Hebrews is full of warnings against unbelief, and chapter 11 is full of positive examples of people who believed God. Since we have all these witnesses to God’s faithfulness, let us resolve to doubt God no longer and to trust him for our future and for our finish to the race.

Slide

3. Our participation in the race

Slide

Heb. 12:1b Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

So now we come to the actual race. Let us note first of all that the Christian life is described as a *race*: it is not a leisurely stroll down a country lane, it is not even a 100-yard dash, it is instead a marathon, since we are commanded to run it with *perseverance*.

Slide

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines perseverance as “continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition” and that is an excellent description of what it means to run the Christian race. The Hebrew Christians were facing the threat of social isolation and active persecution, and they needed to hear these words of challenge.

And we too as Christians are called to run with endurance, following the example of our Lord Jesus who “endured the cross” and “endured such opposition from sinful men”. So whether you are a teacher, a prayer warrior, a witness, a mother, a servant, a new believer, an old believer, or any other sort of Christian, be prepared to run your race over the long haul. Make up your mind that nothing will prevent you from running a good, patient race for the glory of God!

Fortunately we are not called to do this on our own: the same God who calls us also equips us

Slide

Rom 15:4-6

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* NIV

Since everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, this includes the examples of faith we have in Hebrews 11, and we come back again to the cloud of witnesses who are now not only our cheerleaders but are also our examples. It is as if God is saying “they were faithful, and you can be too”.

And then God sends the Holy Spirit to empower us and fill us with joy and peace.

Slide

Rom 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Slide

4. Our perspective on the race

Slide

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

The Message translation puts it this way:

Slide

Heb 12:1-3

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed — that exhilarating finish in and with God — he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

So what did Jesus go through?

Slide

1. He was born to an unwed mother - Mt. 1:18-19
2. He was born in a stable - Lk. 2:7
3. Born to poor parents - Luke 2:24
4. His life was threatened as a baby - Matt. 2:13ff
5. His birth was the cause of terrible suffering - Mt. 2:16ff
6. He was moved as a baby - Matt. 2:13ff
7. He was raised in a despicable town - Nazareth - Luke 2:39
8. His father died when He was young - Mt. 13:53-58
9. He had to support His family - Mt. 13:55-58
10. He had no home and no place to lay His head - Mt. 8:20; Luke 9:58

Slide

11. He was hated and opposed by others - Mark 14:1-2
12. He was charged with insanity - Mark 3:21
13. He was charged with demon possession - Mark 3:22
14. He was opposed by His family - Mark 3:21-22
15. He was rejected, hated and opposed by the audiences who came to hear Him speak - Matt. 13:53-58; Luke 4:28-29.
16. He was betrayed by a close friend - Mark 14:10-11; 18
17. He was left alone, rejected and forsaken by all of His friends - Mark 14:50.
18. He was tried before the high court of the land and tried with treason - John 18:33.
19. He was executed as a common criminal by means of crucifixion - John 19:16ff.

So we are running the race, we are surrounded by those who have gone ahead and are now with the Lord, but our gaze must be on the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who died so that we might live. He endured all this and much more (this list does not touch on His mental and spiritual suffering), and so we fix our eyes on Him. In 1954 Roger Bannister of England ran the mile in less than 4 minutes, the first time this anyone had done this, and then a month or so later John Landy of Australia beat his time by a few tenths of a second. Then in August 1954 both men met in the one mile race at the Empire Games in Australia. Landy was leading the race on the

final turn, but he glanced to the left over his shoulder while Bannister ran by him on his right to win the race.

Slide

Landy later said, "I would have won the race if I hadn't looked back: if I hadn't taken my eyes off the goal" So in our race we need to keep looking to Jesus, and not to the troubles that surround us or the opposition we face. Remember that Peter did OK at walking on the water when he was looking at Jesus, but he began to sink once he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the storm around him.

So how do we look?

Slide

We look to Jesus the compassionate man; the one who identified Himself with us, and who know what it is to go through trials and suffering

Slide

We look to Jesus the author of our faith; He is the one who blazed the trail of our salvation

Slide

We look to Jesus the perfecter of our faith. He brings our faith to a triumphant conclusion. Our faith is necessary, our service is valuable, our spiritual experiences are illuminating, but only Jesus can bring all this to conclusion, because He completed His own race.

Slide

We look to Jesus as the perfect Lamb of God. He endured the cross and its shame, and became both priest and sacrifice in His offering of himself on the cross

Slide

We look to Jesus as the one who endured opposition from sinful men

Slide

We look to Jesus who is now seated at the right hand of God, in a position of power and authority.

What a tremendous encouragement it is to have our Saviour, our Shepherd, our King as one we can look to in our times of need and our times of blessing, our times of service and our times of being served, our times of plenty and our times of want.

Slide

5. Our purpose in the race

This is an easy one; our purpose is to win! To reach the end and hear our Lord's words "Well done, good and faithful servant" The winner of the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo was Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia, here completing the final lap of the run

Slide

In the marathon there is only one winner, but in the race of the Christian life we are all winners; the race has been rigged in our favor!

Slide

1 Cor 15:57

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So as we go on in our Christian lives, let us resolve to run the race with patience and perseverance

Let us remember that we are not on your own

We have our Lord Jesus as our example and sustainer

We have the power of the Holy Spirit within us

We have the heroes of faith as our assurance

And finally a word to those of you who are graduating. Wherever you end up, remember that you are still running the race, and make sure to find a supportive Bible-believing church, because we all need the encouragement and support of other believers.