

Endurance: Running the Race

By Dr. Joel Beeke

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Bible Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

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Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation

540 Crescent St NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Website: <http://www.hnrc.org/>

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/hnrc

Our Scripture reading this evening is from Hebrews chapter 12 the first 17 verses.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby. Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the

blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.¹

Thus far the reading of God's sacred Word.

Dear congregation, perhaps you have seen billboards put up around Michigan of late with a picture of Winston Churchill and these words, "Never, never, never give up," five words that consisted of an address that Churchill once gave to a graduating class. It became one of his most famous speeches. Those words are suitable for all the causes that Reverend VanderZwaag mentioned this morning, causes of going back to school, post camp causes, causes of church ministries beginning, a new season upon us, family visitation, catechism classes. And all these things we begin again. The message is, "Don't give up. Persevere. Keep on keeping on."

But that is especially the message, the spiritual message that comes our way in and through the Lord Jesus Christ when we are true believers. "Hold fast your profession, keep on keeping on."

You see, it is one thing to begin the Christian life and quite another to persevere in the Christian life; one thing to repent and believe the gospel, another thing to go on repenting and go on believing the gospel.

The miracle of Pentecost, Acts 2:4, is great. But the miracle of Acts 2:42, "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers"² is in some ways every bit as great, perhaps even greater.

My dad used to say to me often as a teenager when he knew I felt called to the ministry, "Remember, if you become a minister one day it is relatively easy to begin a ministry in the Church. The challenge is to maintain it, to persevere in zeal for it."

It is easy to begin a women's Bible study group, for example, but to persevere in it by you women or to persevere in the Sunday school ministry or jail ministry or in H.H.O.M. or in any worthwhile endeavor is where the rubber hits the road.

But that is also true personally in our own internal spiritual pilgrimages as we run the Christian race. Have you, too, discovered that, the difficulty of persevering? Sometimes it is harder to go on believing as a Christian than to become one in the first place. The trials, the needs, the confusions, the riddles can be so great. Have you experience that as well? Your decline in first love can be so penetrating that to go on can be an awesome challenge.

And perhaps you young people, you are fearful even now. Reverend VanderZwaag mentioned that already this morning. Going back to your own locales again and living out what you have heard. Perhaps you say to yourselves, "Well, the workshops that, the

¹ Hebrews 12:1-17

² Acts 2:42

addresses, the conversations, this spiritual fellowship, the Christ centered expositions I received were so meaningful to me and I was on a wonderful plateau all week long. How great it is to be in an atmosphere where there weren't the normal worldly temptations, but I know myself too well. I know when I get back a week or two from now I am going to be prone to slip backward, to live, at best, as a mediocre Christian again and not to zealously walked as Christ walked."

And so I am afraid of this defeatist attitude in which I might say to myself when I go back, "I am so wicked. I am so poor in my ongoing sanctification. What is the use of really serving the Lord? How can I persevere in believing in the absence of anything tangible to confirm my faith? How can I go on believing God is light even in the darkest night? How can I persevere paying the high cost of faithfulness, of enduring persecution and affliction and loss for the gospel's sake?"

Well, dear young friends, every believer faces these challenges, young or old faces these discouragements in striving to walk as Jesus walked. Our hands hang down when we face personal failure, when others let us down or when providence denies our desires. Disappointment produces discouragement and discouragement results in weak knees. We feel weak. We feel tired emotionally, spiritually. And then we say to ourselves, "Well, I might as well throw in the towel. What is the use of persevering. What is the use of continuing to fight temptation when everything seems to work against us, everything seems hopeless? Why persist when life seems vain?"

We say with Asaph, "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain."³

Well, tonight I want to deal with this theme of spiritual discouragement and perseverance, not the causes so much of discouragement, but the solution for it, how we endure in the Christian race when the motivation to press on fades and our life of holiness weakens. How to persevere when we are in danger of giving up the fight against our besetting sins and it seems that God is no longer answering our prayers.

The answer that I want to lay before you is a simple yet profound one. We endure as Christ endured when he was tempted to surrender in the battle of spiritual warfare. We walk as he walked by his grace and by his strength.

And Hebrews 12 teaches us how to do that. I want to focus with you tonight particularly on verses one through three, Hebrews 12:1-3.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such

³ Psalm 73:13

contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.⁴

So my theme tonight with God's help is, "Endurance: Running the Race," running the Christian race. I have three thoughts. First, its mission: What are we to do? Second, its manner: How are we to do it? And, third, its motives: How are we to be stirred up to do it? Endurance: Running the race, its mission, manner and motives.

The epistle to the Hebrews was written to discouraged Hebrew Christians by Paul or by a close associate of Paul around 68 AD, just before the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans.

The entire epistle is actually a sermon to lift up the discouraged Jewish convert who were lending too great an ear to their fellow Christ rejecting Jews. Their fellow Jews were looking at them and saying, "What does your religion amount to anyway? You don't have high priests in their fanciful clothing. All you have got is a simple white washed building. You have got no ceremonies, no rituals. Where is your temple? Where is your high priests?"

And some were suddenly persecuting the Jewish believers, marginalizing them socially. Others were persecuting them more openly, withholding things like jobs...if a Christian and a non Christian applied for a job they would give it to the non Christian. So they ostracized the Hebrew Christians. And many of these Hebrew Christians, as a result, were getting downcast, discouraged, tempted to abandon the faith.

Now the author of Hebrews encourages them. He encourages them by showing them that all the Old Testament rituals and ceremonial laws had been marvelously fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the first nine chapters of this epistle he opens up the fulness of Christ as the greatest high priest, the perfect high priest who brought a perfect sacrifice and who makes perfect intercession.

And then in chapters 10 through 13 he focuses on how we are to go on living out of his saving work, not being discouraged, not giving up but going on, persevering so that we may approach the throne of grace freely and run the Christian race.

And so these four chapters really answer the question of: What is the use of going on? What profit is there in the Christian faith and in enduring in that faith?

Well, you understand right away, don't you, that the Hebrew Christian situation is very much like our situation today in our world. Our world today looks down on us as Conservative evangelicals and reformed people and regards us as a kind of modern day Puritan killjoy. We, too, need endurance. We, too, often feel rejected, marginalized, even ostracized, persecuted. And you young people who do know the Lord Jesus Christ you know what I mean. Some of you are not in the in group in your college or even in high school because you are a Christian. You are considered a goody, goody or a brown noser.

⁴ Hebrews 12:1-3

You are someone out of touch, rejected from the inner circle. You are ostracized, teased perhaps, belittled, maybe persecuted openly.

And it is tempting sometimes, isn't it, to ask: But how...how can I endure?

Well, you see, the Hebrew Christian's need for endurance and our own, as well, is evident not only from our text, but from lots of texts, especially in Hebrews. In fact, I counted 96 verses in Hebrews that encourages and commands endurance in the Christian life.

For example Hebrews 10:23, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering."⁵

Hebrews 10:36, "For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise."⁶

And then whole chapter of chapter 11 we are presented with this great history, this hall of fame or hall of faith if you will of one hero of faith after another made heroic by grace, of course in the Old Testament panorama of an unending stream of believers and we are told that they all lived by the virtue and power of faith as Old Testament stalwarts. And immediately in the back of this chapter we read our text, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."⁷

Now the word "patience" here is actually the very same word that is used—if you will look with me just for a moment—in verse two and three translated as "endured." So actually the Greek word for endurance is used in verse one, in verse two and verse three. Verse one teaches us we need to run with endurance. Verse two teaches us that Jesus endured the cross. And verse three says Jesus endured contradiction.

So the theme of our text tonight is obviously this key word of endurance, this patience—which is a rather weak translation because that can sound like an inactive grace—this patience that is active, holy patience, active patience that we call endurance, this is what we need. And this endurance implies hard labor. It implies carrying a burden faithfully. It implies the mission of what it means to be a Christian and that mission you find in the key phrase in our text, the operative phrase at the end of verse one, "Let us run with [endurance] the race that is set before us."⁸

So in one word the mission of the Christian life is to run our Christian race to its end with patience looking to Jesus.

⁵ Hebrews 10:23

⁶ Hebrews 10:36

⁷ Hebrews 12:1

⁸ Ibid.

Now it is interesting that the apostle uses the metaphor of a race. He has in mind, of course, the endurance testing relay races that took place in the great coliseums. And those races didn't focus on the sprinters, but they focused on the long distance runners. Whether the runners were going to reach the finish line, these were distance events.

Now the contestants in this race were, of course, the Hebrew Christians and the author himself—and by mutual faith all those of us sitting here tonight who are true believers—we are involved in this race. We are on the racetrack, every one of us.

The Christian life is a race. The Christian life is an endurance test. The Christian life is a long relay in which runners need each other. It is a serious race. It is a race that involves fighting the good fight of faith. It is a race that sets life and death before us. It is a race in which we must persevere. We can't step off of the racetrack when we tire. We have to struggle. We have to race on all the way, all the way to the finish line. We have to do that with endurance. That means we have to run steadily, deliberately, actively every day, a means of grace, by reading and searching of the Scriptures, hearing of the Scriptures, personal, intercessory prayer, reading of sound literature, fellowship among the saints, sabbath keeping and so on. All these means must be faithfully, actively, habitually, prayerfully utilized. Christian life is not passive.

Thomas Watson said, “'Tis sweating work all the way to glory.” It is a battle. It is a race, a Christian race.

Now, by the grace of God, of course, we believe that all Christians will reach the finish line. We believe in the preservation of the saints. That doesn't take away from the sweat of the race and the reality, the intensity of the race. It is true, of course that our perseverance—because we believe in the perseverance of the saints as well—is a fruit of God's preservation. And yet that perseverance is worked out in us. It doesn't happen just objectively outside of us, but subjectively by grace within us and through us. We must persevere. We must run the race. Our tennis shoes hit the pavement step by step. We must plod on, run on. We are not spectators in the stands. We are out on the track.

And so we have to continue on, continue on repenting, continue on believing in times of prosperity, in times of adversity regardless of circumstances. And, you see, this is the challenge, to stay in all kinds of weather, to stay under all kinds of circumstances, to stay in the race.

It is so tempting just sit it out. It is so tempting when you get weary to just fall by the side.

“No, no,” says the author. “Press on.”

The word translated as “endured” actually in Greek means to stay on, to stay on target, to press on no matter what the price even when the burden becomes heavy, seemingly too heavy to bear. We need to go on. We need to endure. We need to keep hoping, keep

trusting in the Lord even when everything seems to go against us, even when he seems to go against us. “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.”⁹ You see, you go on trusting he is our greatest friend even when he seems to come out against us as our greatest enemy. Endure. Keep on keeping on until one day when you shall pass into glory and it shall be said of you, “These are they have come out of the great tribulation, out of the great race and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”¹⁰

But that day is not yet. Here our mission is to run the Christian race.

But how do you do that? Well, that is our second thought: The manner. And our text tells us from both a negative and a positive perspective of how you are to do this. Negatively it says we must rid ourselves of sin and hindrances. We must rid ourselves of sin and hindrances.

Notice the text, “Let us lay aside every weight.”¹¹ That is, every hindrance. “And the sin which doth so easily beset us.”¹² That is, not just our besetting or our bosom sin or our dogging sin whatever you want to call it. But it is all sin including the bosom sin. “And [so] let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”¹³

So sin is our great enemy. Sin is that which strenuously opposes our endurance. Sin easily besets us, entangles us, trips us up. Sin compasses us about like the cloud of witnesses compasses us about. We’ll hear about that shortly. But as they compass us about so sin compasses about negatively. It trips us up. It hangs upon our neck. It clings to us like clothing clings to our body.

“Sin,” said John Owen, “is always at our elbow.”

Sin comes out on to the racetrack and it hangs upon us. It wants to drag us down and drag us back and take us out of the race. And I am not talking just about unbelievers. I am talking about believers because they are the ones that are really running the race. The difference, of course, between believers and unbelievers is that unbelievers cling to sin. They go after it. They love it. They welcome it. Believers find that sin clings to them. They want to get away from it. But to their dismay it still clings to them.

And so the apostle speaking here, particularly to believers says, “If you want to finish the race you have to lay aside every weight, everything that hinders you.”

How foolish a runner would be if he were to wear heavy clothing and paraphernalia, carry paraphernalia with him. A runner who runs wants to have as little clothing as possible. In fact, the Greek athletes ran naked because they didn’t want the smallest weight to hinder them.

⁹ Job 13:15

¹⁰ See Revelation 7:14

¹¹ Hebrews 12:1

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Well, so it is with believers. And this is one reason why the battle is so severe, so difficult. We need much endurance because there is much that hinders us. There is much sin that stands in our way, much sin that lays on our heart, weights that hold us back, unbelief and fear and worry and selfishness, yes, but also other things of this life, the love of things, the cares of this life, scores of other things, legitimate things such as relationships and professional duties and recreational pursuits. All when given undue proportion of our time can hinder us in this Christian race.

I have told you before in my life how that playing organized basketball it for me personally became a hindrance to my Christian...I had to let it go to run the race. And maybe with you young people it is something else. There are certain things in my life today that I purposely don't do that maybe are perfectly legitimate doing, but I don't do them because they hinder me. You have your own things. You can fill in your own blanks. What hinders you? What weighs you down? What keeps you from the Lord? What drags you to one side?

“Lay it aside,” says the apostle. “Lay aside every weight and every sin that hinders you.”¹⁴

Stewart Oliat who was last years' speaker at [?] conference and whom I met again just last week or two weeks ago...his addresses have just been published and I just took them home with me as I left and he is preaching on Romans six and he is saying how from that perspective, too, a Christian is a new creation in Christ. He is to be reckoned dead to sin and he says it is like in the state of sin we are slaves and we have been delivered and we cannot go back into slavery again and so we must lay aside every weight and every sin.

And Stewart Oliat says this in his brand new book, he says, “The slave who died and rose again is now spending his days serving the king who saved him from his old master's power. But one day at the market while doing an errand he meets his old master. Hah, some of you meet him, too. You meet him as you surf the internet. Others of you meet him in the television programs that you watch. Others meet him in the friends who are close to you. Still others meet him in the books that you read. And all of us, yes, all of us meet him in our every day lives and relationships and in the secrets of our thoughts. Yes, we do.”

And then Oliat goes on to say that we need to cut these things out that hinder us. And he says, “For some of you this will mean subscription to the internet perhaps or getting rid of your TV or stopping reading certain sorts of books and magazines. For others of you it will mean giving up football or a favorite sport or even ending unhealthful friendships. The old master meets each one of us in different places and we are all vulnerable.”

But we are not all vulnerable in the same areas. Anything which unnecessarily leads me into confrontation with the old master is to be abandoned. He is much stronger than any of us think and we must avoid him like the plague.

¹⁴ See Hebrews 12:1

That is what the author is saying here. Whatever hinders you, cast it to a side.

“Ah,” you say, “But that’s hard to do. For so long I have been doing this or so long I have been engaging. So long I have been tripping up over this sin.”

Ah, yes, that is all the more reason why you need to do it now. “Put off, put off the conversation and lusts of the old nature,” says Paul, “and be renewed in the spirit of your mind. Put on the righteousness and holiness of the new man.”¹⁵

There is no other way to run the race. You have got to lay aside sin. You can’t trivialize sin. You can’t dumb it down. You can’t desensitize your conscience. You can’t let down your guard against it. You have to confess it. You have to hate it. You have to forsake it. You have to kill it. Abandon it knowing it will entangle you and hinder your walk with the Lord.

“Yes,” you say, “but I am so tempted to give up this battle against sin because I keep tripping up. I fought one sin, perhaps. Again and again I keep stumbling and falling into it. And I am afraid I have nothing but sin to offer to the Lord. What is the use of staying in the race?”

Well, of course, that is unbiblical reasoning. That is actually satanic reasoning. Thanks be to God, dear believer, sin which needs to be laid aside can be laid aside. Sin does not belong to you as a believer. It doesn’t belong to your new nature. You are to reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sin is not your life. Christ is your life says Paul. Christ is your life. Sin is a foreign intruder, a thievish foreign intruder. And you can’t let him rest comfortably without admonishing him and trying to kick him out of the home of your heart.

About two weeks ago I met this lady again who...in Wales, who told me a story of some intruders. Three men came into her house and began to pack up all her china and all kinds of other things. And she rebuked them. They had her tied to a chair. She was an old lady. They had her tied to a chair. She was in her 80s. And she spoke up. She said, “You men have no business coming into my house, stealing like this. You know you have to meet the Lord in the day of judgment.”

And one man sat down beside her and began to talk to her and then the other two came and sat beside her and, well, finally they went back to their stealing, but in the end they didn’t take everything they wanted. She restrained them a little bit. But you see, she did all she could to cast them out.

That is what we are to do. When sin comes in we have to say, “What are you doing here, sin? You have got no business being in the home of my heart. I have been born again

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:23-24

by the grace of God. I am a Christian. I am a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have got no business sinning. Be gone, sin.”

How do you view sin? Do you welcome sin? Do you tolerate sin? Do you fight sin? Do you resign to fatalism in the face of sin? Or do you lay it aside?

“Well,” you say, “But I try to lay it aside, but I can’t. I can’t.”

Well, maybe you are going about it the wrong way. You see your need for endurance. You see your need to lay it aside. You try. You keep stumbling. What do you need? Well, you need to see the positive side. The positive side is to look to Jesus. You see, the apostle doesn’t end at the end of verse one. It is not just a matter of laying sin aside. It is a matter of looking to Jesus for the strength to lay sin aside and looking to Jesus to endure and to run the race. Enduring is a matter of faith. And that faith that is fixed on Jesus, says the apostle. And so just as the Old Testament saints lived by faith in the promises of God, so we, surrounded by them as a cloud of witnesses, may focus by faith on Jesus who we know who he is because we have the New Testament Scriptures. And we know that all the promises are yea and amen in him.¹⁶

So we look to him. And we look to him immediately, right now, in the midst of our personal struggles. That is the way to run the race. As a runner focuses his eyes on the prize, perhaps, at the end of the race or the finishing mark, so we are to hold Jesus up before us. And as we run we keep our eye on him, swerving not to the right or to the left, looking to him for strength and grace and endurance and everything.

And only as we look to him will we find the strength we need to lay aside sin. You see, the problem is we can become so accustomed to failure in our battles with sin and become so busy attempting to sanctify ourselves in our own strength that we fail to mediate on what Jesus is and who he is and what he has done for believers.

And the author to the Hebrews wants to correct that. He says in verses two and three, “Look to Jesus. He is the author of your faith. He is the pioneer of it, the one who went before you. He is the one who planted it in you and he is the finisher of your faith, the perfecter of your faith. He is the one that holds you the whole race. He is the one that enables you to end the race. He is author and finisher. He is A and Z and every letter in between. Look to Jesus. He will see you through. He won’t allow one of his children to fall to one side of the race’s road or to another because his reputation of being the finisher of the faith of his runners would be at stake. So look to him. He will give you what you need.”

So that is the manner in which you run the race. You cast aside sin and hindrances as you look to Jesus for strength.

But now we need motivations. And the author to the Hebrews spends the rest of our text setting before us three grand motivations to move us, to prod us to keep running this race.

¹⁶ See 2 Corinthians 1:20

For the remainder of our text the author to the Hebrews acts like a coach giving a motivational talk to his runners before a big race.

And there is three parts to his talk, three things to motivate them to endure. The first is the example of Christ. We need to look to him, he says, who, verse two, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”¹⁷ So this number one motivation actually has three parts to it, three ways we are to be motivated by Jesus’ example. First, by what he endured.

“Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.”¹⁸ And in these words “endured the cross,” what the apostle wants to do is he wants to summarize the very worst that Jesus received in this world, all his sufferings: Gethsemane, Gabbatha, Golgotha. He wants the cross to symbolize the whole endurance of all that he went through, all the hanging naked and the Father’s flame of wrath on Golgotha, but also all the crawling as a worm on the ground at Gethsemane and being no man. All that he endured is included, summarized. Here we have a summary of all the love and the willingness of Jesus to suffer for sinners. He endured the cross. He who deserved the crown endured the cross. He who didn’t deserve to dirty his feet with the sin and dust of this world was willing to let his feet be nailed to the cross of death. He endured. He endured. He endured meritoriously so that we would endure.

Yes, that, too, but here especially the emphasis is because he endured you, too, endure. Follow him. He didn’t waiver. He will give you strength not to waiver. He didn’t hesitate. He will give you strength not to hesitate.

And this endurance is a moment by moment endurance throughout all the agony, throughout all the long six hours. Every hour, every minute, every second he endured. His every breath on Golgotha was an embracement of the cross because at any moment he could have called for legions of angels and said, “Be gone, cross.” But he endured. He endured to the end so that he might merit our endurance to the end. He endured so that we won’t perish forever. Be motivated by that to endure for his sake.

But, secondly, we are to be motivated by what he rejoiced in, not only what he endured. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross. So, you see, the cross wasn’t his terminus point, his ending point. Jesus saw even in his greatest sufferings, he saw beyond the cross. He saw he would be victor in the battle with the powers of evil that he would soon be resurrected by his Father and taken home to glory to receive his promised reward. Oh, the joy that was set before him. It was a joy of his own homecoming, the joy of reunion with his Father, the joy of being crowned with honor and glory and the joy of bringing home the millions whom the Father had given him from all eternity past to bring them home as sons of glory. The joy was before him. Knowing he would gain more than he lost on the cross motivated him. And so it should motivate us. The joy that lies before a Christian when he runs a race knowing that by grace he will one day enter the portals of glory, knowing that one day he will be able to rest and be thankful and praise his Savior

¹⁷ Hebrews 12:2

¹⁸ Ibid.

forever. Oh, knowing one day he will be married to Christ in everlasting marital bliss. Oh for the joy that lies before us we ought to be motivated to run the race.

Do you remember this story I told you some months ago? That wonderful story of a 19th century young blind man who fell in love with an Admiral's daughter and the Admiral found out a surgeon who thought he could help the young man and do surgery on him. And the young man said, "Well, do surgery on me just a few weeks before I get married because if it works I want the first thing I see to be my bride."

And it happened that way. And he was still bound with bandages the day of his wedding. An the bride stood at the end of the aisle, the church aisle and the music began to play and the bride began to walk in. The father came forward and took off the bandages. And the young man could see. The first thing he saw was his bride walking down the aisle. And he couldn't help it. When she came in front of him he just spoke freely. He said, "You are far more beautiful than I ever imagined you to be."

Well, one day, dear believer, when the race is over and you enter the celestial bliss and Jesus comes to meet you and you will see him face to face no more through a glass darkly, you will cry out loud enough so to speak for all of heaven to hear, "Oh, Jesus, Thou art far more than I ever imagined thee to be."

Oh, what a motivation to be with him as his bride forever.

Well, then, thirdly, we are to be motivated by this example of Jesus not only by what he endured and by what he rejoiced in, but by what he despised. "Despising the shame."¹⁹

He died an accursed death. It was a shameful death. The same, in some senses, was even worse than the pain. And yet he despised the shame. He was made sin, shameful sin on the cross. But he despised the shame to willingly endure the cross. He didn't grumble. He didn't protest. He didn't ask for a retrial or an appeal because of the punishment and sentence of the cross. He endured the cross and embraced the shame.

Well, we shamed ourselves back in paradise, didn't we? And we shame ourselves every day by sin. But what a wonder, you see, that he is not ashamed to call us brethren, we who are brought to repent and believe in him.

And so we must be willing to follow him and bear the same that is involved with being a Christian. An there is shame. There is mockery. There is ridicule. I think of John Bunyan's Christian. Do you remember when he began to run? He began to see his need. He began to run for the Celestial City. And his wife came out and his neighbors, his children, his neighbors, they call out to him and they mocked him and he put his fingers in his ears and he said, "Life, life, eternal life..." And he ran on. He despised the shame. He had to have Jesus. He had to have spiritual life. He had to have communion with God.

¹⁹ Hebrews 12:2

Oh let Christ be your motivation. When you run the race, dear young people, endure the cross for his sake. Look forward to the joy for his sake. Despise the shame for his sake. Live by the fear of God, not by the fear of man. Count it all joy when you suffer for his name's sake for great is your reward in heaven.

Endure by the example of Christ. That is your first grand motivation and the greatest. But there's two more motivations. The second motivation is the beginning of our text. "Seeing for the joy that was set before him endured the cross."²⁰

The second motivation is the witness of the saints. Even as we are surrounded with sin and various impediments while we run, we are also compassed about with a cloud of positive witnesses, if you will, spectators in the stands, if you will, who encourage us to endure. And these, of course, literally, are the Old Testament heroes of faith. We have them listed for us in Hebrews 11. And these Old Testament heroes encourage us in several ways. Let me just mention three of them briefly.

They encourage us, first of all, by themselves having been faithful spiritual athletes in the past. Every one of them is, so to speak, a gold medal winner. They have all completed the race. They are not lying witnesses in the stands. But we almost feel as if they are because their past lives bear witness to their enduring faith so vividly for us on the pages of Scripture. In fact, the author to the Hebrews says of the first one, Abel, that "he being dead yet speaks."²¹ This is as if he is alive. It is as if he is in the stands.

Secondly, they encourage us because they have reached the finish line themselves and now they cheer us on, as it were, to persevere, putting our faith in God and in the Messiah as they have done. Their lives declare the Lord is faithful. And so they cheer us on by their walk of life.

And we read about Enoch, how he walked with God. We should be motivated to walk with God. When we read of Caleb that he followed the Lord fully all the days of his life. Isn't he, there, to be a motivation for us that we might follow the Lord fully? And Esther, "If I perish, I perish, but I will go in to the king."²² And so many more, you see, Old Testament saints who lived by faith. It is almost as if they are watching us from the Old Testament pages nodding in encouragement saying, "If I by grace endured to the end, so can you, so can you."

But those hallowed witnesses are multiplied for us. We don't only have the Old Testament. We have all the New Testament cloud of witnesses. They compass us about. And they heroes from Church history, our fathers in the faith, the compass us about. How encouraging are the histories of Paul and John and Athanasius and Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Whitefield and Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones, all enduring in faith through formidable obstacles and opposition?

²⁰ Hebrews 12:1

²¹ See Hebrews 11:4

²² See Esther 4:16

Martin Luther felt so close to David in the psalms that he said, “If David is one of your best friends I doubt if you are a Christian.” Another place Luther said, “When I read the old divines I feel so close to them, I feel like they are my best friends.” He even said, “My best friends are usually dead ones.” They are witnesses. They are dead in the flesh, but they are living witnesses through the pages of their writings. Can’t you say that? Don’t you have your favorites, too, like I do? Oh, what an encouragement to me certain divines have been. What an encouragement Calvin has been and Perkins and Goodwin and Samuel Rutherford sitting beside my bed for years. When I get down I pick him up and read him. He lifts me up. He is one of those wonderful witnesses surrounding me, a cloud of witnesses.

This cloud of witnesses, when you read of their lives in the Bible or when you read the books they wrote they move you by the love of Christ or they challenge you by their own godliness or they instruct you by their spiritual insights so that your heart pounds and your eyes fill with tears and your feet make a straight path and you run the race.

Oh, what a wonderful cloud of witnesses. This is not wispy mysticism, friend. This is God’s work, God’s provision, God’s cloud of witnesses. This is just another reason to be reading the Bible, regularly searching the Scriptures and reading sound literature.

Actually, when you read the history of the Old Testament you see an amazing thing. These people continued in faith. They persevered when they didn’t even have the New Testament and they persevered when all kinds of horrible things happened to them. Hebrews 11 verse 37 says, “They were stoned, they were sawn asunder.”²³ Have you been stoned? Anybody cut you in two like they cut Isaiah? They “were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented.”²⁴ And yet the endured by faith clinging to promises. Oh, let them be a cloud of witnesses to you. If they didn’t give up, why should you? If they persevered why can’t you?

You see, our text tonight, I believe, encourages us to think more realistically than we usually do about the communion of saints. Could it be that the saints already in glory are far more interested in how we run the Christian race than we realize and are closer to us than we think? Certainly we believers are in grievous error when we take so little interest in those who have gone before us from whom we have so much to learn about running this race.

Those in glory are our teammates, our teammates who have reached the goal and who will not be crowned until we join their ranks and share in their victory. The souls of believers are under the altar, as it were, and Revelation says, and crying out, “How long, Lord?”²⁵

²³ Hebrews 11:37

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Revelation 6:9-10

Oh, they are waiting, as it were, till soul and body will be reunited and we with them and the Church will be complete in glory. And so they are eagerly awaiting that day and urging us onward and forward by their own examples of endurance.

“Let us also endure,” says the apostle.

And then, thirdly, these living witnesses on earth still surround us today. It is not just Old Testament, New Testament, Church history. It is today. Some of you in these past 20 years in a very real way have become witnesses to me. You are part of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds me encouraging me onward by your own example or perhaps by a word now and then.

You see, you have your own cloud around you, living people, maybe your husband, maybe your wife, maybe some children, maybe an office bearer, maybe a minister, maybe other friends in the pew, maybe those sitting two pews in front of you right now, part of your cloud of witnesses, people who help you along the way. We weren't meant to be lone rangers, friends. We were meant to be surrounded. We need fellowship with each other. We need to speak with each other about the faithfulness of our Savior and the ways of God and encourage each other to run the race.

Some weeks ago when I was in Spurgeon's church and I spoke on a somewhat related theme and I mentioned about how big the family of God's people was and afterwards there was a young lady who came up to me and she began to cry. She said, “I am an orphan and I have no siblings, no brothers, no sisters. I have only one uncle and he lives over the ocean and I have been feeling so lonely lately. I have been weeping myself to sleep at night many a time because I am so lonely in the midst of this big church. But you opened my eyes tonight to see that I am surrounded with brothers and sisters in the family of God. So why should I be discouraged?”

Yes, we are fellow runners. If we are believers we are fellow runners. And so we can encourage one another.

We encourage one another sometimes even by those who have just recently died. Some of the deceased elders, the past 20 years I still think of them often. You do, too, how they encouraged. I think of what they said. I am thinking right now of Henry Langrack saying, “My dad used to say to me, ‘You have got no business sinning as a Christian.’” I think of that often. It helps me in times of temptation. I have got no business sinning.

I think of my own dad right now. “Preach Christ, Joel. Preach Christ. To your dying breath preach Christ.” How often he has encouraged me.

I think of my own wife coming to church, feeling harassed by Satan. I can't preach. She looks across the car at me and says, “You're going through it again, aren't you?”

I say, “Yes.”

She says, “He has helped you before. He will help you again. He’ll help you one more time.” It is a witness, a witness.

Let this cloud of witnesses compass you about, you see, to encourage you.

And then, finally, this is all to be done so that you don’t get wearied and faint in your minds. That is the third and final motivation. Not only the example of Christ and the witness of the saints, but thirdly your own strength and piece of mind.

Look at verse three. “For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”²⁶ Such contradiction. It refers back to verse two, of course. But what he means is take a long look at Christ. When you are still prone to be weary and faint and give up, look back to Christ again. Look at all the hatred, the opposition, the gainsaying, the contempt of sinners against himself and remember you face nothing compared to what he faced. So don’t be weary and don’t be faint.

“Yes, but I am tired, too tired to read, too tired to pray, too tired to meditate.”

No, you are not. Look to Jesus. Look at the cloud of witnesses and gain strength and keep running. Put one foot in front of another. Go forward. Look to him. Consider him. Consider his perseverance. Consider that he knew all things that should come upon him and went forth and he will give you strength to do so.

Persevere. Keep on keeping on inspired by his example, encouraged by the saints. Your weariness will vanish. Your faintness of mind will be dispelled. Your strength will be renewed and you will receive freedom to endure to his glory.

Amen.

²⁶ Hebrews 12:3