

## *Running to Jesus*

Hebrews 12:1-2

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Turn with me to Hebrews 12 if you have your Bibles with you. If not, we have it projected here in front. Last week, we were spending time together in Hebrews 11 as we've finished in looking at what the writer and preacher of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12:1 that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This great cloud of witnesses are all those, and multiplied many more, that he wrote about in Hebrews 11. And here, what he does is he moves us towards action out of reflection of what the Lord has done in His promises in preserving these saints who have gone before us. He talks about how these promises are to be lived out by the Christian and those in his audience. And what he does is he takes a very traditional metaphor for the Christian life, and it is the metaphor of a running race, a marathon, an endurance race. And this great cloud of witnesses, he means for us to see it as if we were in a coliseum watching and if not participating in the race that we're surrounded by these onlookers, these witnesses, who've gone before us who are now with the Lord enjoying restoration. Yet they are witnesses to our race in this life, enduring in the race following Christ, running to Christ.

Next week, we will look at together looking to Christ. But this week, it is running to Christ. I can think of no better illustration than what is possibly the most dramatic finish of all of the Ironman world championships. It took place in the very earliest years of this race. If you haven't seen it, I encourage you just to Google search today – some point this week – the name Julie Moss and Ironman.

Julie Moss at the time was a senior in college. She really loved to surf more than anything else. She really wasn't an athlete outside of surfing. And she would occasionally run, and so forth, but her real dream was to surf. And so, she wanted to be a physical education major at Cal Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo, California, because it was very close to the surf; that's where she wanted to be. It was in her fall year. She had to have a senior project that had to be particularly related to physical education. She had no idea what she was going to do. She turned on the TV and happened to see on ABC them following that year's Kona World Championship of Ironman; it was in September of 1981. And she watched the finish and she said, there's my senior project.

So, she set out. The funny thing is that she had never actually rode a bike a hundred miles or more at one time until two weeks prior to the race. Not advised. Because if you know Ironman, it involves a 1.3-mile swim, it involves 112-mile bike ride, finished off by a marathon all on that big island of Hawaii, Kona. And it goes through the lava fields. It's extremely difficult. But here's what she said about what happened on that day. She was in the remaining miles of the marathon. She was, at that point, 20 minutes ahead of second place. But things did not finish quite the way she had hoped.

As she entered the last few hundred feet of the race, she says,

"I was vaguely aware of the blinding effect of the bright camera lights in my face. Thankfully, if I couldn't see them, maybe they couldn't see me. By now I was an absolute mess. I started to run. The slight turn in the road by the large banyan tree 200 feet from the finish was enough to throw me off balance and down I went. The spectators seemed to be right next to me. I soon felt some arms come around me as I attempted to get up. I heard the voice of the race manager Valerie Silk in my head warning me that if anyone received outside assistance, they would be disqualified. I pushed my helpers away and made it appear that their help was unsolicited and that I was trying to honor the rules.

“I was within a hundred feet now and could see the finish line. I was thrilled by the sight and wanted to cross the line showing my respect for the race, that it taught me so many things about myself throughout the day. A woman was trying to lay me a hand, but I put my hand up slightly to signal no. From the slightest side-glance, I realized it was my mom holding out the flowers to me. I felt bad for waving away her sweet gesture, but the next moment I was down again, and I knew I wouldn’t have the strength to get on my feet. The helping hands would surely disqualify me. My only option was to stay down and to crawl. It was a relief not to struggle so awkwardly in front of so many and attempt to right myself. It felt safe and unobtrusive to stay down on all fours and to get to the line as fast as I could. It was only 20 feet away, and in my mind’s eye I was making good time.

“The replay tape reveals a slower, more truthful version. It was while I was crawling that I glimpsed feminine legs pass by me. I didn’t look up. I didn’t have to. Kathleen McCartney had gone passed, and I was simultaneously disappointed and compliant. I was on the ground dragging myself along while Kathleen was bounding towards the finish. She had the very finish I had envisioned for myself and prompted the one last attempt to run, only to end up on the pavement crawling across the finish line to second place.”

That was written on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her race. She would continue to race Ironman and do much better. But it was that failure, it was that incredibly difficult finish surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, that would serve as one of the most memorable finishes of Ironman and, actually, would serve even to this day as one of the greatest motivations for racers and people – men and women alike – to even attempt a crazy thing like Ironman. We have some Ironman folks here this morning. You know of what I speak. I would never do anything so insane.

But I could think of no greater illustration in our modern day of exactly what the preacher of Hebrews was getting at. We, those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Scriptures tell us we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and the Lord, who Himself is both with us by also watching over us. The Christian life is a very difficult endurance race. How are we to conduct ourselves? What are we to do? This is what the preacher of Hebrews is telling us and answering. So, look with me at Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that you would help us by your Holy Spirit to see in your Word the calling, again, to run this race. A race that we do not run alone. A race that we do not run on our own strength, but it is alone by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your Word. Open our eyes that we might be able, by your grace, to lay aside every weight and sin that we might run this race with endurance looking to Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

As we look at this passage together, you’ll see in your outline laying aside every weight and laying aside sin. These ought to be together as he means for them to be together. As we look at this, we must understand what is meant by the word “weight” here, and what is meant by the word “sin,” and then understand what are we to do with it. As he tells us here, he says “to lay aside,” to take it off, to remove it, to run from it if necessary. The idea here, first, is to lay aside every weight. Because he puts it into the

context of a marathon, he had in his own experience, his own understanding, and, also in the understanding of those who were listening to him and reading this sermon, they understood it was the Roman games – this idea of the marathon, this idea of what runners do. And, of course, normally they would go about in robes. But here, to lay aside every weight is to remove any interference, anything that would cause the runner to stumble, or to not be able to run freely even if it meant being removed of all outer layer of clothing, running naked if necessary.

So, the image here is the removal of excess weight. The weight is not necessarily of the body, but it is of anything that one would wear, anything that one is carrying, anything that would interfere with the runner. The idea here as the metaphor placed in the context of this passage, he says, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight,” every weight that what? “That keeps us from running with endurance the race that is set before us.” What is that race? It is running to Jesus. The whole idea of the Christian faith has within it Jesus who has gone before us, Jesus who is with us, so in time aspect, it is Jesus who went before us to the Cross – which he points to in the passage – that His death on the Cross is in our place, so, therefore, He has paid the price that we owed because of our sin to a holy and righteous God. Jesus Christ has gone before us enduring the Cross, therefore, claiming for us a salvation that is through Christ alone by faith alone. But it is Christ who has gone before us.

So, in this sense, He has gone before us, but He has also done this before us, after us. So, He’s gone ahead of us. But He’s also given us His Holy Spirit, so He’s always present with those who call on His name. But He is also before us because He is not incumbered by time, He’s outside of time and He will be the one who at the end of all time, He will come and return and take those who belong to Him and He will create a new Heavens and a new Earth. This idea is not only that Jesus is the One who has gone before us enabling us by His Cross and by His grace and mercy to walk a life of obedience because we run to Him. And this race is one that requires great endurance.

So, in the context of the Christian life, the whole idea here is if there is anything that interferes with our allegiance to Christ – here he’s not getting into sin yet. He’s saying, is there anything, even that we call good, even that is recognized by the Lord as good, if anything begins to intervene and keep us from a greater allegiance to the Lord, walking with Him in obedience, pursuing Him, we must lay it aside.

Francis Schaeffer wrote about the church at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, speaking of weight. His two greatest concerns for the church at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were that Christians would be distracted by the pursuit of – and here I will use the language of Hebrews – the weight of personal peace and affluence. Is there anything wrong with affluence? No. Is there anything wrong with experiencing personal peace? No. But if our lives are so centered around seeking those two things where we do not want to be bothered by those around us, or difficulties, or challenges, and we do whatever we can to avoid them, we are seeking personal peace. If we hope that we find that personal peace by the pursuit of affluence, or gaining more affluence, then we are allowing things which the Lord calls gifts, which are good, they become a weight and they distract us. Because what can happen is it veers into idolatry and sin when they become more important than the Lord Jesus Christ, when they become more important in our minds and our hearts than following Christ.

I once heard it described like this. What captures your imagination when you have a moment of peace? What do you daydream about? It’s not that daydreams are bad. The question is, is that what we’re working for? Is that what our hearts long for? “We are not first and foremost thinking things,” the professor Dr. Jamie Smith says. “We are first and foremost, as Augustine taught us and as the Scriptures teach us, we are loving things.” We might think that the Lord Jesus Christ is our salvation, He is our Savior, He is the Lord of my life. I might think that, but what does the love that comes out of my heart, what captures my distracted time, what so easily becomes a weight to me? What forms my hopes, and desires, and daydreams? Those very likely can become things that distract us.

It can also be all sorts of things. It can be preoccupation with politics. It can be the preoccupation of keeping your house clean. It can be the preoccupation of Facebook. It can be the preoccupation of reading books. It can be the preoccupation with your education. It can be the preoccupation with keeping your spouse happy, more than the pursuit of the Lord. Those are all good things, but they become a weight when they become something that gains our greater allegiance than our love for the Lord.

So, my question isn't to prescribe to you, what is the weight? The question that the text calls out to us with is this. Is there any weight in your life that is distracting you and pulling at the allegiance of your heart more so than a love for the Lord? It's not that we remove them all together, but that we begin the process of assessing, are there good things in our lives that have become more ultimate than we first thought?

What he's calling us to here isn't just the removal of any interference. He's also, in that essence, calling us to renew our commitment. And a part of renewing that commitment is doing that assessment. And it is not easy work, it requires time. It requires reflection and will come with great trial. We are prepared for this because of one of the forebearers of our faith, Martin Luther. Oftentimes, many people haven't read any of the 95 theses except for the first one. But here are the last couple. He says,

“Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ their Head through penalties, death, and Hell. And, thus, be confident of entering into Heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.”

Let me repeat number 94 of the 95.

“Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ their Head through penalties, death, and Hell. And, thus, be confident of entering into Heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.”

What this means is that when we begin to say no to some of this weight and yes to being renewed to our commitment of following and running to Christ, it might mean we run into penalties. It might mean that we have to sacrifice even good things. It might mean it will feel, at times, like Hell because we weren't aware just how close these things – which are good – we were clinging to for our sense of identity, for our sense of worth, for our sense of motivation, for even our purpose.

Let me say that what the writer and preacher of Hebrews means to communicate, and Luther in even more pointed fashion, this is a life and death proposition. And here I am preaching to myself. I've shared this at least once at an evening service, but let me just share this with you. I have a friend – sort of jokingly, but it's kind of serious – he's my confessor, and I go to him and I talk to him about my spiritual questions. And in sharing our lives together, he'll share spiritual resources from his – he's a very committed Catholic. And I have been greatly enriched by the ways in which he's taught me to walk this Christian life. And one of these is a prayer of submission. It goes over a period of nine days. And each prayer is begun with a short paragraph of a conversation, an imaginary conversation between the one who's praying and the Lord, and each day is different. But the simple prayer is this: I commit myself, my whole self, to you, Lord Jesus, take care of everything. And I am to repeat that ten times. But not just in quick succession, but in the process of “take care of everything,” I take a pause between it and I begin to reflect, what are things in my life where I am not saying to Jesus, take care of everything?

And much like Julie Moss found in the lava fields of Kona, she realized that she was stripped bare to her very core, and she found out who she really was, what she was willing to endure. And in the process of going through, now, the second succession of these prayers, I've begun to see in the very deep crevices of my heart things that are good, but things that I'm still clinging to by my own strength. And I haven't asked the Lord to take care of them. But they're a weight.

So, I am in the middle of this. Let me encourage you if you are a Christian to consider praying something like this: Lord, show me. But remember that the Lord leads us to repentance through His kindness. He's not about making us feel guilty about the things that we love. He means to show us that these things were never meant to be invested with our ultimate love. And in His kindness and in His love and mercy as we ask him, Lord, are their weights that are interfering with my allegiance to you? Show me, and by your grace enable me to commit again to this run of endurance.

Secondly, he says, we're not only laying aside every weight, we're also laying aside sin. Now here, he is not calling out any particular sin. It's just the simple Greek word that means "sin," that is anything that is displeasing to the Lord, which as we've learned before, all sin is never original. Satan doesn't have an original bone in his body. He's simply a thief. All sin is simply taking that from which God calls good and it makes it something other than good. It becomes something that becomes in and of itself, or it becomes a means of salvation. And so, what he's saying here is lay aside every sin, this idea of battling against sin. I'm thankful for teachers who are much more elegant than me who remind me of exactly what our rich faith talks about with regard to laying aside every sin.

Saint Claire Ferguson, as he talks about the need for repentance – repentance, you'll remember, is the recognizing that we're walking in a pattern of sinful behavior and we turn and we go the other direction recognizing that even as we turn and go the other direction, we're still tempted to go back but we're making the conscious choice aided by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who has gone before us, whose given us everything we need for life and for godliness. He gives us the strength to say no to sin and yes to new obedience. And so, this call to laying aside sin is nothing less than a call to repentance.

Saint Claire Ferguson reminds us of what the Westminster Confession says with regard to repentance. It says,

“Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace. By it, a sinner out of the sight and sense not only of the danger but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ, to such as are penitent and so grieves for and hates his sin as to turn from them all unto God purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.”

And herein, the confession reminds us we never enter into the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ because we seek to be obedient to God's law. Christ was obedient to the entire law, which is why He was a righteous substitute for us. And we are saved by grace of His work alone. But that doesn't mean we don't have work to do because we are grateful and empowered by His grace, which means God's law is still God's law. It is a reflection of His righteous character. So, if we go back and we read the Ten Commandments, we see that the first five are about our relationship directly with the Lord. The second five is our relationship with our neighbor. When was the last time you read the law of God? And let me encourage you if you haven't done that, go back and read it – Deuteronomy 5, Exodus 20 – and then find a copy of the Westminster Larger Catechism and look at how they seek to apply what God's law applies for us. And what is so uncomfortable, so incredibly uncomfortable, is the ways in which it gets down into the every-day, nitty gritty, mundane parts of our lives and begins to show just how broken and sinful our natures are.

But Jesus summed it up for us. For you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. And all the laws in the commandments hang on these, too. What it means is, for us, to begin to take a look at our life, our patterns, and begin to say, is there anything that I'm allowing in my life which I am presently doing or thinking or giving myself to that is in direct opposition to Christ's holiness and His glory?

Let me talk about this battling with sin, finally, with this idea. One of the things that can be so interesting is we begin to think about the things that we do instead of the things that we leave undone. And here, I'm grateful for the teachers of the faith who have gone before us who have said, have you

remembered the idea of sloth? Sloth is one of the seven deadly sins, go look that up, too. But sloth is one of those, and it's the one that gets under my skin the most. Because sloth does not have pictured a group of people who are just couch potatoes. It's not about just laying around and being lazy. Sloth in its oldest form is actually something quite different. Sloth is the desire for ease even at the expense of doing the known will of God. Whatever we do in life requires effort. Everything we do is to be a means of God's sanctification. A slothful person – here I put myself at the front of the line – is unwilling to do what God wants because of the effort it takes to do it. Sloth becomes a sin when it slows down, and even brings to a halt, the energy we must expend in using the means of grace.

So, here we have Bibles galore all on our devices of all translations and kinds, and yet, sloth begins to show itself when the effort to simply pick it up and read it is too hard a work but opening up Gmail seems the right thing to do. Please understand, opening up Gmail is not a sin; oh, I wish it were. But putting my work, putting all the things of this world that scream out at me for attention, paying attention to it and leaving this undone is as onerous to the holiness of God than any active sin could be. All sin, all of it, both that which we do and the commandments that we leave undone, are displeasing to the holiness of who God is. But thanks be to God, it is His Word that tells us it is His kindness that leads us to repentance. He gives us this calling back through the prophet and through the preacher of Hebrews. He says to lay it aside, to battle against it.

Friends let me say to you, if you do not have someone to whom you can confess, pray that God would put someone in your path. If you have no one to whom you are confessing, no one who is keeping you accountable, sin is crouching at the door. And if that crouching at the door, if it already has tentacles around your heart and leading you astray, having someone to confess to, having someone to pray for you and you pray for them begins to work through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the means of grace that He gives us to turn from sin and unto new obedience. It is a matter of life and death. And slothfulness to these good things will lead us to a life of apathy.

And I know it's not about whoever's preaching in front of you. Goodness knows there are far more eloquent than I am. But I will tell you that the Word of God and the sermons that we hold dear scream out at us, run to Jesus. Run to Jesus. And the way to begin to guard against sin is to begin having a fellowship of others, even if it is one person with whom you can be honest and transparent about the sin that you find yourself so easily entangled by. But God in His grace gives us a way out. For no sin has seized you except that which is common to man. But He is faithful, and He will give you a way out. This is what the Lord calls us to, and this is what our faith reminds us of.

The shorter catechism says, "What is sanctification? Sanctification is the work of God's free grace whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness." This is what He enables us to do. And as it tells us here,

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

We do not run to Him on our own strength. We do not run to Him because it will earn us anything. We run to Him because He has already gone before us, and He is with us. And He desires for us to know the freedom that comes from escaping the entanglement of sin and throwing off the weight of the things that distract us from allegiance to Christ. Friends, fellow believers, this is what we get to do. And the Lord in His kindness receives us anew.

If you are not a believer this morning, perhaps what I've said seems incredibly offensive. But what I've given to you is some of the description of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. And let me say very clearly to those who are believers, we would do far better as the people of God if we began to take this

Word to heart and did not look first outward at the broken and dying world, but we looked rather inward to our dying hearts and said, Lord, by your grace I will not sit in judgement on anyone else for by your grace, Christ has sat in my place and was judged for my salvation. Therefore, it is not my duty to judge those who are in the world, but rather to place myself before the all gracious, and all merciful, sufficient Savior Jesus.

And if we began to humble ourselves to confess our sin staying out of the seat of judgement and out of the place of point fingers, out of the babbling tongues and worthless knowledge and worthless things and humbled ourselves before a holy and gracious and loving Savior, how much would the aroma of Christ waft from this place and change the world around us. This is the way of life, and it never leads us to a place of judgement.

So, if you're not a believer this morning, please understand I do not sit in judgement over you one wit. I say to you that I am a sinner in need of grace. I am broken to my very core, but by God's grace I say to you, He has forgiven me, He has renewed me, and He has renewed enumerable ones in this room more than you could ever imagine. And He knows you to your very core. He knows your sin better than you know it. And He loves you and He calls you to Himself. And I remember hearing for the first time that without knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, my sin would lead me to an eternal separation from Him. And it is only by His grace that we are saved.

If you are not a believer this morning, I call you to consider the claims of Christianity and the call of the Gospel to find forgiveness and salvation in Jesus Christ alone that makes us a humble, merciful, loving people. May the Lord do this, and may He give us grace to run to Jesus. Let's pray.

Father we now ask that you would enable us by your grace to be mindful by your spirit and by being sensitive to the leading of your Spirit of any weight that distracts us from allegiance to you and any sin that is causing us to stumble. Lord I pray that by your grace and kindness, you would lead us to repentance. That you would enable us by your Word to rest in Christ alone who has gone before us to say no to sin and yes to righteousness, not that it earns us anything but that it is a response to the grace that is greater than all our sin. Thanks be to God, grace, grace, God's grace, grace that is greater than all our sin. Help us, Lord Jesus, to run the race and run to you, in Jesus' name. Amen.