

Faith That Endures

Hebrews 12:1–3

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On October 20, 1968, athletes from around the world gathered in Mexico City for the Olympic marathon. The course was especially demanding because of the city's high altitude. Among the competitors was John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania, an accomplished marathon runner with genuine international credentials. However, about 19 kilometres into the race, Akhwari became entangled with other runners and fell heavily. He dislocated his knee, badly injured his shoulder and suffered deep cuts to his leg. Most athletes would have withdrawn. In fact, eighteen runners failed to finish the marathon that day. But Akhwari refused to quit. His injured knee was heavily bandaged, and he continued – sometimes running, sometimes limping, sometimes almost walking. By the time he entered the Olympic stadium, the winner, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia, had crossed the finish line more than an hour earlier. The medal ceremony had already taken place, and most of the spectators had gone home. Yet the few thousand people who remained rose to their feet and applauded as the lone Tanzanian painfully completed the final lap and crossed the finish line. After the race, a reporter asked him why he had continued when he had no chance of winning. His reply has become legendary: 'My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.'

Brothers and sisters, that is a wonderful picture of the Christian life. God has not called us merely to begin the race of faith. He has called us to finish it. The Christian life is a marathon. The question is not simply, 'Have I started following Jesus?' The more important question is, 'Am I still following him? Am I persevering? Will I remain faithful to the end?' That is exactly the concern of Hebrews 12.

The Christians who first received this letter were under enormous pressure. Following Jesus had become difficult and costly. They had experienced ridicule, rejection and persecution because of their faith. Some had become discouraged, and some were even thinking of abandoning Christ and returning to Judaism, where life seemed easier and safer. The writer of Hebrews writes to encourage them not to give up. Throughout the letter he demonstrates that Jesus Christ is greater than everything they might be tempted to return to. He is greater than the prophets, greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than Aaron, and he is our perfect High Priest who has offered the one perfect sacrifice for sin.

Having spent eleven chapters showing us the greatness of Christ, the writer now comes to his great exhortation: "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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith..."

These verses are among the most stirring words in the New Testament. They are God's call to every believer who has grown tired, discouraged or weary. Perhaps that describes some of us this morning. Perhaps you have been following Christ for many years, but lately the race has become difficult. Perhaps you are facing disappointment, struggles or opposition because of your faith. Or perhaps you have simply become spiritually tired. God's word to us this morning is simple, clear and wonderfully encouraging: *Don't give up. Keep running. Keep looking to Jesus.* As we look at this passage together, I want us to notice four exhortations that will help us cultivate a faith that endures.

1. Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

The writer begins with these words: '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.' Again, the picture is that of an athlete preparing to run a race. If you were watching the Olympic marathon this morning, you would never see a runner standing at the starting line wearing a heavy backpack, a thick winter coat, hiking boots and carrying two suitcases. That would be absurd. A runner removes anything that will slow him down. Every unnecessary weight is laid aside because the goal is to run as freely and efficiently as possible. The writer says that the Christian life is exactly like that. Before we can run well, there are things we must lay aside.

First, he speaks about 'everything that hinders.' That is important because not everything that hinders us is necessarily sinful. Some things are perfectly good in themselves, but they become weights that slow our spiritual progress. For some people, it is simply busyness. Life becomes so full of work, appointments and commitments that there is little time left for prayer, worship or reading God's Word. For others, it is constant distraction. We live in a world of smartphones, emails, social media, endless news and entertainment. We are constantly connected, yet often spiritually distracted. It becomes difficult to hear God's voice because our minds are always occupied by something else. For others still, it is comfort. There is nothing wrong with enjoying God's good gifts, but if comfort becomes our highest priority, we will often avoid anything that requires sacrifice, courage or costly obedience. None of these things is necessarily sinful. But they can become weights that keep us from running well. The writer says, 'Throw them off.'

Then he mentions a second category – 'and the sin that so easily entangles.' Unlike the first category, these are not merely weights. These are sins that cling to us like vines wrapping themselves around a runner's legs, making it difficult to move. The writer doesn't specify one particular sin because different believers struggle with different temptations. For one person it may be pride, for another it may be bitterness or an unwillingness to forgive, for another it may be sexual temptation, for another it may be unbelief – a heart that gradually stops trusting God's promises. Whatever it is, the instruction is the same. Don't carry it with you. Lay it aside. Repent of it. You cannot expect to run well while holding on to the very things that trip you up.

Brothers and sisters, perhaps this is a good question for each of us to ask this morning: *What is hindering me from running the race well? Is there a habit that is slowly dulling my love for Christ? Is there a sin that I have tolerated for far too long?* The Christian life is about continually laying aside whatever keeps us from following Christ wholeheartedly. Throughout the Christian life, we must continually examine ourselves, asking God to show us anything that is slowing our progress or drawing our hearts away from him. Only then are we ready to do what the writer says next.

2. Run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Having laid aside the things that hinder us, the writer now tells us positively what we are to do: 'And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.' Again, the picture is that of a race. But notice that it is the picture of a marathon. The Christian life is not about how quickly we begin, but about how faithfully we finish.

One of the great dangers in the Christian life is that we can become very enthusiastic at the beginning. But as time passes, life becomes more difficult. Trials come, disappointments come, suffering comes. We become tired, we become discouraged. The temptation is to slow down or even to stop running altogether.

The writer says, 'Run with perseverance.' Perseverance means steadfast endurance. It means continuing when the race becomes difficult. It means refusing to give up, even when every part of you feels like quitting. That was exactly the situation facing the original readers of Hebrews. Following Jesus had become costly. Some had suffered persecution. Some had lost their possessions. Others were beginning to wonder whether following Christ was worth it. They were tempted to return to Judaism, where life appeared easier and safer. The writer says to them, and to us, 'Don't give up. Keep running.'

Then he adds something very interesting. He speaks about 'the race marked out for us.' The Greek literally means 'the race lying before us.' The picture is of a racecourse that has already been laid out. The runner does not choose the course. He simply runs the course assigned to him. In the same way, God has marked out the course of our lives. That means every one of us has a different race to run. Some are called to leadership, others to quiet and faithful service that no one else notices. Some face chronic illness. Others experience seasons of loneliness, grief or disappointment. Still others face opposition because of their Christian convictions.

Now, if God has marked out our race, then he also knows every hill we must climb, every valley we must pass through, every burden we must carry and every trial we must face. Nothing comes into our lives by accident. Our loving heavenly Father is with us every step of the way. That doesn't mean the race will be easy. It wasn't easy for the readers of Hebrews. And it wasn't easy for Jesus. But God calls us to keep running, trusting that the One who has marked out the race will also give us the grace to finish it.

3. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Having told us to throw off what hinders us and to run with perseverance, the writer now tells us how we are to keep running: 'Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.' The Christian life is not simply about determination. It is about direction. Where are your eyes fixed? Every runner knows that where your eyes are fixed affects how you run. If you keep looking over your shoulder at the other runners, you lose momentum. If you are constantly looking to the left or to the right, you lose focus. The runner who finishes well is the one whose eyes remain fixed on the finish line.

The Christian life is no different. We live in a world full of distractions. There are countless things competing for our attention. There are the pressures of work, the constant stream of news, social media, entertainment, material possessions, ambitions and worries. There are also disappointments, hurts and failures that can consume our thoughts. Sometimes people don't stop following Christ because they have carefully thought through the claims of Christianity and concluded they are false. More often, they simply become distracted. Their eyes gradually move away from Christ, and before long they have wandered from him. That is why the writer says, 'Fix your eyes on Jesus.'

Then the writer tells us why Jesus is worthy of our attention. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The word 'pioneer' means one who goes ahead to open the way for others to follow. Jesus has already travelled the road we are travelling. He has faced temptation. He has experienced suffering. He has endured rejection. He has gone through death itself and emerged victorious. He has already completed the race. He doesn't merely point us to the finish line. He has gone there before us.

But Jesus is not only the pioneer. He is also the perfecter of our faith. That means he not only begins our faith; he brings it safely to completion. Isn't that wonderfully encouraging? Our perseverance ultimately does not depend upon our own strength. It depends upon Christ, who faithfully sustains his people and brings them safely home.

4. Consider him who endured.

Finally, the writer gives us one more exhortation. 'Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.' Notice where he finishes. He finishes where he began – with Jesus. The word 'consider' means to think carefully about him, to reflect deeply upon him, to keep him continually before your mind. Why? Because weary Christians regain strength by looking to Christ. The original readers desperately needed this encouragement. Many of them were growing weary. Some were discouraged. Some were questioning whether following Jesus was worth it. Some were thinking about giving up altogether. The writer says, 'Consider Jesus.' Think about what he endured, think about the opposition he faced, think about his obedience, think about his suffering, think about his victory. And think about where he is now – seated at the Father's right hand. Then remember this: If Jesus endured the cross and entered glory, then our present sufferings are not the end of our story either. For those who belong to Christ, suffering is never the last word. Glory is.

Brothers and sisters, every one of us will face seasons when we feel tired. There will be days when we feel like giving up. What should we do? We are to look to Christ. We are to remember that he has already run the race before us. He is with us now by his Spirit. And one day, by his grace, he will bring us safely across the finish line.

On that October evening in Mexico City, John Stephen Akhwari finally crossed the finish line. He didn't win a gold medal. He didn't set an Olympic record. By the time he entered the stadium, the race had long been decided. But that is not what people remember. Nearly sixty years later, the world still remembers him because he finished. When asked why he had not given up, he simply said, 'My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.'

Brothers and sisters, in the Christian life there will be days when, like the first readers of Hebrews, we feel weary and wonder whether it is worth continuing. God's answer is clear: Yes, it is worth it. Why? Because Jesus Christ is the real deal. He is the Son of God. He is our great High Priest. He is our Saviour. He has already run the race before us. He endured the cross. He conquered death. He is now seated at the right hand of the Father. And one day, all who belong to him will share in his victory.

So this morning, let us take to heart these exhortations from God's word. First, throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Don't carry unnecessary weights. Repent of sin quickly. Lay aside everything that keeps you from running well. Second, run with perseverance the race marked out for you. Don't spend your life wishing for someone else's race. God has marked out your course. Trust him and keep running. Third, fix your eyes on Jesus. Don't become distracted by the world around you. Keep your eyes on the One who is both the pioneer and the perfecter of your faith. And fourth, consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Amen.