

Hebrews 12: The Race

Hebrews 12:1-3 (ESV)

- ***“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. Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” -Hebrews 12:1-3 (ESV)***

- When I was a kid, I was absolutely certain that I was going to go to the NBA. There wasn't even a doubt in my mind. I had my whole career planned out. I wasn't even thinking about college because I'd probably skip that and go straight to the pros, but if I was feeling

generous I would give a program like Duke or Kansas a year of my talent. And then I would be drafted.

- And I was realistic, I knew I could determine my draft team and was going to have to humbly accept whoever drafted me, even if it wasn't the 76ers....
- But I would wear number 9, because my nickname was going to be K-9, cuz I was the top dawg on the court! I had my logo and signatures already designed for my shoe deal and autographs I would have to sign.
- I would practice my starting line up introductions and how I would wave to the crowd. And then I would practice all of the moves of my favorite players like Allen Iverson, Tracy McGrady...
- To me it wasn't a question of "if"it was "when"
- But as you can see, I didn't make it to the NBA, unfortunately. Duke or Kansas did not get graced with my lack of talent.

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- Now, I may not have had the natural athleticism as some of my heroes, but there have been others of my size and frame and same level of athleticism (That I had back then) that have made it to those levels
 - Why couldn't I??
- Well for one, I went about my "training" all wrong.
- All I was doing was copying what I saw on highlight reels from my favorite players.
 - I didn't even consider what they did outside of game day.
 - I wasn't copying the 2000 shots they would get up a day
 - The 3 different workouts they would get in before I even got out of bed
 - The countless hours of practice on the mere fundamentals
 - The countless miles run and weights lifted to force their bodies into the right shapes
- No, that was just too basic, that's too time consuming, that's too difficult, I wanted to get to the good stuff, the exciting stuff
- It's like in this generation and era of basketball we have the kids that all want to be Steph Curry, the greatest shooter of the basketball to ever live
- And all of these kids who are barely strong enough to get the ball to the rim, and are all coming onto the court and jacking up these 35 footers yellin' CURRY!!
- But even Steph Curry put out a video where he explains that whenever he walks in the gym for practice, he starts right in front of the basket
 - He then makes so many in a row, and then he steps a few feet back
 - Makes so many in a row, then goes to the free throw line
 - He literally said himself, "The worst thing that you can do is walk into a gym and just start jacking up 3's"

- You have to work on the basics, the fundamentals, first...and NEVER stop working on them
- You see, we as Christians, have a tendency to see the faith of others, and think, “Oh yea! I wanna do that!”
 - And then we get so confused as to why either we fail, or the enthusiasm fizzles out
 - But it’s more often than not because we don’t take the time to put in the work, the discipline, the amount of work on the fundamentals of faith that they have put in.
- Many say, “I wanna be a missionary like Paul!”
 - But don’t consider the 14 years of training he went through before he went on his first missionary journey
- Many say, “I wanna lead people like Moses!”
 - But aren’t willing to go through the 40 years of wilderness that he went through first
- We want to see walls fall down like Joshua
 - But aren’t willing to make the terrifying walk of faith that it took to get there.
- Now, the writer of Hebrews has given all of these great examples of faith in chapter 11. Like we talked about last week, examples of those who have both received greatly and lost greatly in their journey of faith and when he gets to chapter 12, he gives us insight to the private discipline that led to those great showings of faith
- He says, **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” -Hebrews 12:1a (ESV)**
 - Now a lot of times this passage is interpreted as if we have all of these great heroes of the faith, surrounding us spiritually, as if they are all up in heaven looking down on us and either cheering us on or judging our every move.
 - However, I think that interpretation is just theologically incorrect.

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- I don't think that Abraham, Moses, and David who are up in heaven surrounded by the glory and majesty of the presence of God, are diverting from that to check on what Kenny is doing
- I do not believe that we go up to heaven just to continue to look down here on earth
- I think that just minimizes the glory of what Heaven actually is
- And I know we love so say things, when we lose loved ones, like, "They're looking down on us from above..."
 - And I get the sentiment, and that it makes us feel better...but I think that mindset comes from being so earthly focused
 - And earthly focus does not lead to lasting faith.
 - They are not supposed to be looking back to where we are, we are to be looking forward to where they are
- And this is not to say that what happens in this life doesn't matter, but if we get our eternal focus right, we will live with such a faith that will impact this world the best way possible.
- CS Lewis once said, ***"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the NEXT. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither."*** -CS Lewis: *Mere Christianity*
- The writer of Hebrews says that we have all of these great men and women of faith that have

gone before us that we can gain appreciation and motivation from.

- And we can look forward to being where they are now!
- When he says we are surrounded, that word can be translated, “to be composed with.”
- Therefore we have been written into the same story of faith that all of these great heroes in the hall of faith were in
- He says: ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also...” -Hebrews 12:1a (ESV)***
- His use of the word, also is telling us that he is going to give us some practical fundamentals of faith that these people mentioned in chapter 11 lived by that we have the same opportunity to live by as well.
- ***“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.” -Hebrews 12:1 (ESV)

- Here’s our first point for today:
- **FAITH IS A CALL TO ENDURE**
- He says let us run with endurance
- Endurance implies difficulty
- Because you don’t have to endure something that is easy or comfortable
- That word endurance in the greek is also translated patience
- *There’s a story about a man who went to his pastor one day and asked his pastor if he would pray that he would develop patience in his life.*
 - *So the Pastor said, “Yea! I’ll pray for you right now!”*
 - *And the pastor placed his hand on his shoulder and began to pray, “Lord, I pray that you bring trials and tribulation into this mans*

life. I pray that you would bring struggles and troubles his way....”

- The man interrupted and said, “Whoa whoa whoa! I didn’t ask you to pray for that!”
- And the Pastor said, “How else are you going to develop patience if you don’t have situations in your life in which you can practice?”

- This word endurance is the same word that Paul uses in Romans 5 when he said, **“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...” -Romans 5:3-4 (ESV)**
- You will never develop endurance and patience in your life if you never suffer
- And suffering is not something that we need to pray for because suffering is going to come for us in this life whether we ask for it or not.

- Jesus promised us, in this world you will have trouble...
- And when the writer of Hebrews tells us to run with endurance the race set before us
- That word **“Race”**, in the greek is the word **“agōn”** which can be translated: **“conflict, fight, contention, or race.”**
- Now the word “agōn” sounds like what? Agony!
- Which is to say that this life that we live is, in fact, an agonizing struggle!
 - Now we don’t like to think that way because the American dream is based around the elimination of struggle and more and more our society tries to tell us that we are entitled to a life free from struggle
 - But that’s just not realistic
 - We live in a broken world corrupted by sin, that will bring struggle and agony into our lives but we are called to live with a faith that can endure the struggle which will

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result in us developing character and maintaining a greater hope.

- Now throughout this passage, language that the writer of Hebrews uses would have his audience think of the greeks olympic games at the time.
- And it's always blown my mind how some olympic athletes train year round for 4 years, just to participate in a 10 second race in some cases
 - It's wild, but when you watch those races, none of the runners are smiling and giggling while they are in a dead sprint.
 - You can see the struggle and agony on their faces as they are running
 - Because running will put strain and agony on the body of any individual, some have just trained enough to endure the struggle more effectively

- *I remember years ago, I was either in college or right out of college and my brother Matt was in army at the time and in peak physical shape.*
- *And we were both visiting my parents house in Columbia SC and he asked me if I wanted to go on a run with him.*
- *I agreed, not thinking much of it...but he had been doing PT every single morning for who knows how long at that point. I had not...*
 - *So I was out on this run trying to keep pace with him, and I pushed and pushed through the agony, until eventually I had to stop and puke my guts up on the side of the road*
 - *And I kept going, running next to him, feeling like I was on the verge of death...and for the rest of the run I just kept telling him, "I hate you...I hate you...I hate you..."*
 - *Now, the run was not comfortable for him either...but his body was trained to endure the run much more effectively than mine was.*

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- The writer of Hebrews says that this life, and life of faith, is going to be a difficult run for us all, and it's not just going to be a 10 second sprint, it's going to be a life long marathon
- But we can be trained spiritually to endure the struggle effectively and the first practical way to endure that he gives us is: to:
 - ***“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.” -Hebrews 12:1 (ESV)***
 - Now this gives the word picture of the athlete taking off their warm up suit before they run
 - They have to take off the heavier baggy clothing that could hinder them so they can move more freely
 - Now it's interesting that the writer compares this to sin
- And I wonder if it's because the warm up suit is comfortable
- The athlete will be much more comfortable walking around in their warm up suit rather than the spandex that they run the race in
- And us, in our human nature, we are more comfortable with sin than without.
 - But what's most comfortable is more often than not what is best
- And the enemy would love for us as Christians to just hang around in our warm up suits watching the race, then actually getting off the blocks and running the race ourselves.
- So the writer says, it's time to shed what's most comfortable, lay aside that sin that clings so closely...
 - I like the way the NIV puts it, when it says, ***“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles..” -Hebrews 12:1 (NIV)***

- Because that gives me the picture of sin tying our running shoe laces together.
- You ever try to run, or even walk with your shoes tied together? That's what it's like trying to run the race of faith while carrying unrepentant sin.
- We have to lay that aside. And this is something what we have to give intentional and concentrated thought to do because that phrase easily entangles, or clings so closely literally means: "Skillfully Surrounding"
- The enemy has sin and temptation skillfully surrounding us, telling us,
 - *"It's not a big deal if you look at that..."*
 - *"No, you were completely justified to act that way toward that person..."*
 - *"You're just having innocent fun, you're not hurting anybody..."*
- That's why back in chapter 3, the writer told us to encourage each other to combat the "deceitfulness of sin."
- We have to recognize sin for what it really is. It's deceitful, it hindering, proverbs refers to it as vomit!
- And we have to lay it aside, or as the original language says, to cast it off! And verse 2 tells us how we can do that:
 - He says we cast it off, we run with endurance by: ***"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."* -Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)**
 - Here the 2nd point I would like to make today:
 - **FAITH IS A CALL TO IMITATION**
 - Now, why do I say that? Because the writer tells us to look to Jesus.
 - That word "looking" means to turn the eyes away from other things, and fix them on something [or Someone] else

- So we are to turn our eyes away from the weight and sin that so easily entangles, we are to turn our eyes away from this world, we are to turn our eyes away from our desires and primarily focus them on Jesus
- And when we do, we will imitate Him.
 - Ephesians tells us to be imitators of God, as dearly loved Children.
- You see, we are not to look to or imitate, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, or Joshua or anyone else that we see on the list in Hebrews 11... those are just examples that are meant to point us back to Jesus
- Paul told the Corinthians, “Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.”
 - God uses Christian brothers and sisters, in our lives to help encourage us and motivate us on our journey of faith, but we don’t look to them for the foundation of our faith, if we do we will be let down and hurt.
 - We look to Jesus. We imitate Him.
- And you know, we can imitate how Jesus laid aside the sin and temptation that so skillfully surrounded Him.
 - If you remember in Matthew chapter 4, Jesus was fasting in the wilderness for 40 days when satan himself came to tempt Jesus
 - He first tempted Jesus to question His identity and Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3
 - Satan then tempts Jesus to bypass the cross and take the easy way out, and Jesus respond with Deuteronomy 6:16
 - Thirdly satan tempts Jesus with riches and prosperity if He were to compromise His worship and faith, and Jesus responds with quoting Deuteronomy 6:13
- God in His grace preserved for us His written word so that we can be better prepared to endure this life with faith
- That’s why Paul says in Romans 15, **“For whatever was written in former days was**

written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

-Romans 15:4 (ESV)

- When we take the Scriptures for granted, we will lose hope and we will get tangled up in sin
- So often we make praying and reading our bibles so elementary, and we say things like, “There’s so much more to faith than just praying and reading your bibles!”
 - And that’s true! There is so much more than JUST praying and reading your bible, but you will not be able to do more if you don’t have the basic fundamentals down
 - If Jesus wasn’t above it, we should never be above it...in fact, we should recognize how much more we need it because, we ain’t Jesus!
- We are to look to Jesus and how He endured this agonizing race of life, and just how much more agonizing it was for Him!

- The writer of Hebrews says, for the JOY set before Him, He endured the cross....
- *Now, I don’t know how often we take the time to appreciate just how agonizing the cross was.*
 - *The person being crucified would receive lashes from a whip that had shards of glass attached to them designed to grab and pull the flesh off of them until rib cages and organs were often made visible*
 - *The would then carry their cross which could have weighed upwards of 300 lbs to the place of their death*
 - *They would have their wrists or forearms impaled with large rail rode-tie sized nails driven through their flesh to attach them to the cross bar*
 - *And then they would place the heels of each foot on the left and right of the base and drive the nail through one side to the other*
 - *That way, when the body would be collapsed down in which the lungs could not receive*

oxygen, human survival instincts would kick in so that despite how painful it was, the person on the cross would push themselves up from the heels to catch a breath

- All to just prolong the process as long as possible
 - Some would hang their for days, and commonly the person on the cross would not die from blood loss, but rather from starvation, dehydration, and infections of the wounds
 - And if they hung there too long, the Romans would then get a sledgehammer, and shatter their shins so they could no longer push themselves up for air and they would die from suffocation.
- And the writer of Hebrews says, “For the Joy set before Him,” Jesus endured this?? How??
- Jesus felt the agony of that day, even before He went to the cross, He was so overwhelmed with anxiety of the anticipation of all of it that He literally sweated drops of

blood in the garden as Jesus begged for this cup to be taken from Him.

- But He also said, “Nevertheless, not My will, but Your’s be done.”
- The writer is saying that the Joy that Jesus found in the will of the Father and the Fulfillment of His promise, was greater even than the agony of the cross.
- The horrors of that fateful Friday, as terrifying as they were, were not as powerful as the Joys of Resurrection Sunday!
- Because Jesus did not go to that cross, without the promise of His Resurrection, and our opportunity for Salvation
- And He found His strength to endure by looking forward to being seated at the Right Hand of His Father for the rest of Eternity once the temporary agony was concluded
- And on a much smaller scale for us, (I know it may not feel like it at times, but compared to what Jesus went through it is a much

smaller scale)...we do not go through the suffering of this temporary life without the promise of eternal life, where suffering will exist no more.

- That is why Paul was able to say so confidently in Romans 8, ***“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” -Romans 8:18 (ESV)***
- Now this is not to make small of your suffering. The bible does not minimize your suffering, if it did, it wouldn't spend so much time addressing it.
- But in the midst of our suffering, we are to look to Jesus, turn away from everything else, look full in His wonderful Face, and we imitate Him the best that we can by making more of the Joy of His eternal promises and faithfulness, than the troubles of this momentary world.
- And also very practically for us, the writer says that Jesus despised the shame.

- That word despised means: “to think little or nothing of.”
- So the fact that the cross was known as the most shameful way to die, the fact that he would be mocked and made fun of...had no bearing on Him whatsoever
 - The fact that following The Father's Will, would dampen His reputation among humans was of no concern to Him.
- And we need to get to the point, where God's will in our lives means so much more to us than the opinions of the people around us.
 - Because when you follow God in the midst of a godless environment you will be mocked, made fun of, sometimes ridiculed
 - But that shouldn't surprise us because Paul says that the Gospel is foolishness to those who don't believe
- And that should not aggravate us, that should break our hearts. It should lead us to pray for them and love them enough to follow the

example of Jesus and ask God to forgive them because they know not what they do, and to ask God to use us in any way that He can to help lead them to the truth.

- Because once you come to faith and begin to run this race with endurance you come to understand just how ludicrous it is to live any other way
 - But our minds get clouded and distracted so easily, and we have to be reminded how rational it is to live by faith.
- The writer says in verse 3: ***“Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” -Hebrews 12:3 (ESV)***
- For our final point for today:
- **FAITH IS A CALL TO RATIONALITY**
- That word consider means: to think over [carefully], to ponder, to consider
- Consider the ramifications of the Truth of Jesus

- Consider how hundreds of eye witnesses (because His death was a very public spectacle) saw Him die, and then saw Him alive again
- And they didn't just claim to have seen it, most of them died because they refused to deny what they saw!
 - Consider the ramifications if this is true, and if we deny it, or walk away from it, or just don't take this seriously
- Consider just how much he changed the world.
- Napoleon couldn't even help but acknowledge His greatness when he said: ***“Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him...I know men, and I tell you, Jesus is more than a man. Comparison is impossible between Him and any other human being***

who ever lived, because He was the Son of God... Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires, and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity.” -Napoleon Bonaparte

- There was a time when Napoleon would have been seen as a great hero.
 - He was very accomplish in his military endeavors, but he wasn't a hero.
 - People have always had an affinity for super heroes. Great tales and stories of those with great strength or great power.
 - And it used to be, that the great conquerors like Napoleon were the heroes. The greatest heroes used to be those who killed the greatest amount of enemies and conquered the most kingdoms.

- Even in the Old Testament the Israelites created a song for their leaders saying, “Saul killed his thousands! David his ten thousands!”
- That's just the way the world worked and the way the world thought.
- However, after the time of Jesus, our heroes were no longer depicted as killers, but rather as Saviors.
 - Those who could defeat any enemy, while maintaining a moral code and not crossing the line of killing
 - Those who did not focus on conquering but rather saving those in distress, the oppressed, and helping those that can't help themselves.
- It's amazing what we can recognize when we take the time to Consider just how influential Jesus was and continues to be.
 - Isn't it amazing, that a Man who was never known to write a song, has had more songs

written about Him, than any other person in history?

- Isn't it amazing that a Carpenter's Son, who was not known to paint, has had his depiction painted by multiple of most famous painters to ever live?
- Isn't it amazing that we mark our calendars by the year of His birth?
 - What other reason could there be for this kind of world changing impact, than if He actually was the Son of God, actually conquered the grave, and actually is our Savior still today?
- Philip Schaff, a 17th century historian once said: "***This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammad, and Napoleon; without science and learning, shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, He spoke such words of life as***

were never spoken before or since and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times. -Philip Schaff

- The writer of Hebrews says, Consider Him... think carefully, ponder how great He is, and how much He has done
 - With all of His greatness consider all of the hostility He faced:
- "***Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.***" -Hebrews 12:3 (ESV)
 - Fainthearted is better translated lose heart:
 - And the word for "**Heart**" that this is translated here from is the Greek word "**Psychē**" (psoo-khay): is translated most of

the time to the word “soul.” Literally it means: **Breath, or the Breath of Life.**

- One commentator calls this **the rational and immortal soul.**
- The modern definition for “Psyche” is: “The mind, soul, and spirit.”
- The writer of Hebrews says that the only way to not completely lose your psyche throughout this agonizing race that we call life, is to consider Jesus, look to Jesus, to imitate Jesus.
- He is your strength, He is your Deliver, He is your Savior, He is your Hero
- And if we fix our eyes on Him, we will be able to endure.