

# Hebrews 12:1-3

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[0:00] Please take your copy of God's Word and join me in Hebrews chapter 12. Our text for this morning is Hebrews chapter 12, verses 1-3.

While you're getting there, let me remind you that this letter was written by an unknown author.

There's some good guesses, but we're not entirely sure who wrote this letter.

But we do know that he wrote it to a group of Hellenistic Jews that lived on the outskirts of Rome who had suffered much. Keep that in mind. This is a beleaguered church.

They are beaten down. And they have seen many who once claimed to follow Christ leave their midst. And the author here is making this case that Jesus, the way of Jesus, is better than the way of Judaism.

It's better than the systems of the world. It's the more excellent way. And he has begun to talk about the need to persevere in faith in the way of Jesus.

[1:04] And we've been talking about this at length in the past months. So we come to a most beautiful and pivotal text in the letter of Hebrews.

And we may have been able to meet last week. I am at least in part glad that we didn't because it gave me a whole extra week to just camp in these first three verses of Hebrews chapter 12.

It has much to say. And I hope that my mind won't quickly leave it even as we depart from each other today. Before I read it for you, let me remind you, beloved, that this is God's word to us, that it was written for his glory and our good.

And as such, we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands. Hebrews 12, beginning of verse 1 and following. 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 faint-hearted. We have been told by the author of Hebrews in chapter 10 and verse 39 that we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

[2:52] True Christ followers, those who really belong to Jesus, will persevere and they will do so by faith.

He then proceeds in the beginning of chapter 11 to give us a description of faith. Verse 1 says, Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Faith is a trust that all that God has said would come to pass will in fact come to pass. It's unwavering belief in God.

And then in verse 2 of chapter 11 he says, For by it the people of old received their commendation or approval. It was by their faith that they were approved.

The remainder of chapter 11 is him, the author, recounting the faith of this so great a cloud of witnesses. He has spoken of the faith of Abel and Enoch and Noah.

[4:00] He has told us of the faith of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. He has expounded on the faith of Moses and the Exodus Israelites. And in a sweeping manner he has summarized the faithfulness of the rest of the Old Testament's people of old who received their approval by faith.

All of this recounting is not without a point. And today's text tells us exactly what that point is. The author says at the beginning of chapter 12 and verse 1, Therefore, because of all that I've said in chapter 11, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

This text sets forth for us a metaphor of the Christian life as a race. And it begins with the idea of us being surrounded by witnesses.

The author of Hebrews is likely drawing on the Roman Olympics. This would have been very fresh and present in his original audience's mind. Held in very large coliseums, these events would have taken place.

Thousands and tens of thousands of people in attendance to watch such races. He is saying to us, Look at those who have gone before you and are looking on, cheering you on.

[5:28] However, this throng here called so great a cloud is not merely a passive audience, but they are those mentioned in chapter 11 who have run the race before us and have completed it well.

In the New Testament, a witness is never passive, but one who participates in and confirms and attests to the truth. Think of them as retired runners.

They are those who have already spent their careers at the race, and they are cheering the race, and they are validating the worth of running it.

They are saying, Yes, our lives were spent well in the running of the race. With this opening statement, the author of Hebrews is turning from having us observe the faith of others to a faithfulness of our own.

And he does so with four exhortations that are all exhortations to action. So note the four actions, and these will serve as our outline for this morning.

[6:34] The first one found in the middle part of verse 1, lay aside. The second found at the last part of verse 1, run. The third found in verse 2, look.

And the final found in verse 3. Consider. So first, lay aside. The author writes, Let us, so therefore, since we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

The author of Hebrews is further drawing on the race metaphor in exhorting us to lay aside. The laying aside is throwing off everything that would hinder us from running.

Some of you may be runners, and you may know that being light and nimble is helpful to your running. Those of you who have been or are currently in the military know that they love to give you things that hinder your running, right?

That bear you down, boots and packs. He's saying throw those things aside if you're going to run well. In the Roman arena, racers would have stripped off their clothing, quite often down to nothing, and laid it aside before a race.

[7:57] They did not run races in long tunics in the Roman Olympics, right? The race is too important to be hindered in the running of it.

We must complete it. We must get to the end. If we are to be not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls, again, Hebrews 10 and verse 39, then we are going to have to be unfettered, unhindered in the running of this race.

It is these hindrances he's referring to with the phrase, every weight. Let us also lay aside, just like all those people I've referred to in chapter 11, let us also lay aside every weight.

What is weighing you down in your pursuit of your Christian faith? What is hindering you from running well?

The author here is not referring to sin, as he will go on to exhort the laying aside of sin, but rather there are things that tempt us to sin or keep us distracted from the race.

[9:14] Perhaps you need to lay aside a harmful friendship or relationship, a place, a habit, a pleasure, an entertainment.

Maybe there is something in your life that is not inherently evil, but you've been giving it the power to prevent you from running, as you should. Whatever it may be, lay it aside.

The race is too important to hang on to it. Toss it down that you might run. Determine to do so. Pray for the grace of God to do so, then act.

Act for the preservation of your soul. Show yourself to be a Christian by running well the race that is the Christian life.

The author further exhorts us to lay aside the sin which clings so closely. I do not believe that he would exclude any sin from necessity of needing to lay it aside.

[10:22] But I think he is most likely referring to particular sin, which may be different for each one of us. He calls it sin which clings so closely.

And I suggest to you that he is referring to the sin which tends to entangle you. So in the race metaphor, I think of it as that thing that tends to get around my feet.

What is that sin that clings so closely in my life? These sins were once called by saints of old, besetting sins.

The things that we seem to go back to again and again and again. What sin tends to slow you down?

Maybe pride or envy. Perhaps self-sufficiency or self-righteousness. Sexual impurity. Anger.

[11:18] Licentiousness of any kind or legalism. Whatever it may be, lay it aside. This is the exhortation.

Cast it off. Stop giving it the power to hinder your race. Lay it aside. Determine to do so. Pray for the grace to do so.

Then act. Act for the preservation of your soul. Show yourself to be a Christian by running well the race that is the Christian life. Secondly, the exhortation to run.

The end of verse 1. And let us. After we've become unhindered, let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. The author tells us specifically to run with endurance.

The race is not a short race. If you have lived at all laboring to be faithful to the way of Christ, you have felt the length of the race already.

[12:26] Our lives are but a breath. But in our experience, the race is long. The author has in mind the great effort that it takes to run.

Be clear. It is work to run. He does not say stroll with endurance. But he does not have in mind a sprint, but rather a marathon.

The Christian life most often is a work of degrees. Being changed from one degree of glory to another.

It's a slow and a patient work. God seems pleased to work amongst his people in this way. This has been one of the largest lessons I have learned in a pastor over the past decade.

Is that the typical work of the pastor and of the church is a slow and patient work. Beloved, if you are in Jesus Christ this morning, you've been saved by grace alone through faith alone.

[13:30] Which is the guarantee that you will complete the race. But it will take effort on your part. This effort will be all of grace.

At the end of our lives, we will never say, look how good I did running the race. We will say, praise God for the grace I needed to run the race.

We have our very being because of the gracious work of God in us. But it will feel hard. The experience of God will take effort.

You cannot merely sit back on your laurels and expect to finish the race. You cannot wait for God to animate you in the running of the race.

That's why I'm saying to you, determine to do so. Pray for the grace to do so. Then act. The effort will be all of grace. But it will feel hard.

[14:29] It will feel like work. And the exhortation here is that we would do that work. That we would run with endurance. The Lord has yet to remove us from our fallen bodies.

And the work that he has given us to do will take effort. Run with endurance. Run steadfastly to the end.

William Barclay, who is a 20th century Scottish pastor and professor, once described this endurance in the following way. That determination, he writes, unhesitating and unrelenting.

Unhurrying and yet undelaying. Which goes steadily on and which refuses to be deflected.

Obstacles will not daunt it. Delays will not depress it.

Discouragement will not take its hope away. It will halt neither for discouragement from within. Nor for opposition from without. The Puritans called what I believe the author here is describing as running with endurance.

[15:36] As plotting. Which has a bit of a different picture in my mind. Heavy footsteps. You walk in the mud in boots. And your boots get heavier and heavier.

And you take those hard and difficult heavy steps. But you take the steps nonetheless. And you take the next step. And you take the next step. And you take the next step. Until the end. I pray that at the end of your life. You join with Paul who wrote to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4 verse 7 and 8. I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness. Which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day. And not only to me. But also to all who have loved his appearing. Run the race with endurance. Because there is a great reward at the end of that running.

[16:36] The author tells us to run with endurance. He tells us to run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Therefore, whatever challenge you may face. Whatever hardship. Whatever obstacle you can be sure. That it is of God's design. And that it is for your good.

Nothing escapes his grasp. It is a race that he has set before us. And he provides all of the strength necessary that we would run with endurance.

Third. Look. It is the beginning of verse 2. Looking to Jesus. How are we to run with endurance? Practically how? By the grace of God. But what do we do in order to do this? How do we maintain such steadfastness in the face of opposition and exhaustion and trouble?

[17:38] The author of Hebrews tells us that it begins with looking to Jesus. He tells us that to run with endurance, we must look to our supreme example.

The example of Jesus. He uses the title Jesus instead of Jesus Christ or the Lord Jesus Christ. To make an emphasis on his humanity.

He lived the persevering faith that we must also possess. He is, after all, both the founder and perfecter of our faith.

He is literally the pioneer of our faith. Right? He is the firstborn son among many brothers. He has gone ahead of us.

The founder of our faith. He initiates all faith. He bestows all faith. And he is the supreme example of faithfulness.

[18:37] His entire life was characterized by total and complete and unflinching trust in God. At every turn, he believed God.

He completely yielded his life to the command of his father. We gave this some careful thought when we studied chapter 2 and verse 10 of Hebrews. Which says, For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Note there in chapter 2 and verse 10. Both the idea of him being the founder, the pioneer of our faith, and him being made perfect himself so that he could be the perfecter of our faith because he was perfectly faithful.

The author is looping back in the imagery of Jesus, the fully human Jesus pioneering and perfecting faith as our example. So, we should look to Jesus.

And we should learn from him as the founder and perfecter of our faith. And we should take careful note of his motivation in doing this, in being the founder and being the perfecter.

[20:02] How was it that Jesus was able to endure the most horrific and the most shameful of deaths? F.F. Bruce, also a 20th century Scottish Bible scholar, giving a lot of hats, tips to the 20th century Scottish believers this morning.

He spoke to the shame of the cross. This is F.F. Bruce. To die by crucifixion was to plumb the lowest depths of disgrace. It was a punishment reserved for those who were deemed most unfit to live.

A punishment for those who were sub-human. From so degrading a death, Roman citizens were exempt by ancient statute. The dignity of the Roman name would be besmirched by being brought into association with anything as vile as the cross.

Jesus Christ died the death we deserve, bearing the reproach of man and the wrath of God on our behalf. How?

How did he do this? If we're looking to him, what's the lesson we should learn? The author of Hebrews tells us, he endured the cross for the sake of future reward.

[21:15] We are told that he despised the shame, which means that he disregarded it. He didn't put it into account as he considered the suffering that he would endure.

It was shameful, yes. But he thought it a small thing, a thing not to be regarded compared to the future reward.

Didn't even need to be compared because of what awaited him. The author of Hebrews tells us it was for the joy that was set before him.

And then he tells us that he is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. He is seated in the place of honor, the place of majesty at the right hand of his father.

So look to Jesus and learn from his example. We have a far greater heavenly reward than should be compared with the suffering we may encounter in this world.

[22:18] Jonathan Edwards, 18th century North American, once wrote, take notice of Christ's excellent, which is a feast.

Take notice of Christ's excellence, which is a feast. I wonder this morning how many of us are hungry, just spiritually malnourished.

And we are such because we have failed to behold and hang on to and feast upon the excellencies of Christ. We have failed to look to him, both the founder and the perfecter of our faith.

We feel that we can't go on. We feel that we cannot persevere because we have failed to look.

Fourth and lastly, found in verse three.

Consider. Consider. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.

[23:31] The author tells us not only to look, but to also consider. He tells us that if we are to run with endurance the race that is set before us, not growing weary or faint hearted, then we are going to have to think.

Think. Beloved, the Christian religion is a mindful religion. Romans 12, 2. We're not to be conformed to the world, but we transformed by the renewing of our experience, emotions. Many would tell you this. No. Our minds. Our minds. Right? This gateway into our very being. We are going to have to think.

This doesn't mean you have to be smart. It means you have to think. And we're going to have to think deeply. And we're going to have to think repetitively about the example that we have in Jesus. We're going to have to mull it over again and again and again. This work of going from scripture reading to scripture meditation. Right? That we both pick up truth.

[24:37] Right? And then we hang on to truth. Right? We take it up into ourselves that it might come out of us. We'll have to consider Christ.

Beloved, we must nurture the truths in our minds. C.S. Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity, If you have once accepted Christianity, Then some of its main doctrines shall be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day.

Let me read that again because I read that horribly. If you have once accepted Christianity, Then some of its main doctrines shall be deliberately held before your mind for some time every day.

That is why daily prayers and religious reading and church going are necessary parts of the Christian life.

We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed.

We are just so feeble in mind. Many of you are college graduates or currently in college. We are proud of you.

[25:48] You are doing a wonderful work. You are applying your mind to some field of study. This is great. Do not think too much of your ability to understand and hold on to truth.

It will drift out of your mind if you don't continue to feed it. If you don't go back to the text again and again and again.

Right? Daily, behold the excellency of Christ. Make it a habit to open up the scripture and read it until your affections are turned toward Christ.

Where you say, Oh, what a Savior. Do this work. Have the truth in your mind. Carefully tend to it. Let it grow.

It will bring forth faithfulness. So how do you feed the truth in your mind? Do you both look to and consider Jesus and his example every day?

[26:47] What might you need to do to do so? What kind of habits might you need to change in order to consider Christ? Determine to do so.

Pray for the grace to do so. Then act. Act for the preservation of your soul. Show yourself to be a Christian by running well the race that is the Christian life.

Those who are in Christ will persevere to the end. We are not saved by our works. We are saved by the work of Christ.

But the way that we evidence Christ's saving work on our behalf. Being now called sons of God as we live as sons of God.

We do not do this with perfection. We still have this baggage of our flesh. There is still sinful desire in us. But having been set free from sin.

[27:48] Having the spirit of God given to us and his truth. We will grow in holiness if we belong to him. But hear me. It takes effort.

It is a race that needs to be run. It needs to be run with endurance. So this morning do not have false assurance. Do not believe simply because you have made some mental assent to the reality of who Jesus is.

Because you grew up in a home that told you again and again and again. That Jesus is the son of God and he died for your sins. That that is enough. For us to be found in Christ. He must save us. He calls to us from a place of rebellion and hatred of the things of God. He makes us his own. He gives us his spirit and he causes us to walk in his way.

So take a careful look at your life. Take a big step back from it and say. Since professing faith in Christ. Have I grown in holiness? Very degree.

[28:53] Not with perfection. But is there a general trajectory of my life that is Godward? Or do I find that I am sitting in the same place? Or I am declining in holiness?

Do not have false assurance. And then on the other hand. Because I know that we are a church of people who are particularly hard on ourselves. Do not forget the grace of God to you in Christ.

Much of my counseling is saying to people. Brother I think you are a Christian. I know you are feeling horrible right now. I know that you failed in this matter. But Christ also died for this.

He died for your sins past. He died for your sins present. He died for your sins future. Do not place him back on the cross in your own thinking. His sacrifice was sufficient for you.

This is why the church is of great importance to us. We need people when we feel at our lowest. To help us. To pick us up. To welcome us. To say oh I see Christ in you.

[29:55] I see his work. His faithfulness is being perfected in you. So join me church. In looking to Jesus. The founder and perfecter of our faith.

Let's pray. Let's pray.