

## Themes for a Growing Church

### “Run With Endurance”

### Hebrews 12:1-3

This passage tells us to run with endurance, the race that is marked out for us. So we're to make sure that everybody here knows that if you're a believer, this is a description of Jesus, what the Triune God has done and who Jesus is. And if you don't yet know Jesus as your founder, the source of your pioneer, then maybe today's a day to think about, especially if you're online.

Online folks are always glad you're here, but kind of shy to go to church sometimes. Maybe. Maybe it's too personal, but it's good to get personal with the Lord and to know him as author and perfecter. That's what our passage says. We're going to read chapter 12 1 to 3. But before that, I'm just going to go back and pick up a couple verses we touched on last week in chapter two.

*Verse ten of Hebrews says, it was fitting that he, God, for whom and by whom all things exist in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder or author of their salvation perfect through suffering. A couple of verses later says this since therefore the children share in flesh and blood he himself, that Jesus partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*

*And then chapter 12, verse one. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything it hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out or appointed for us. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning or despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Let's pray for a moment.

Heavenly father, give us ears to hear. We pray all that you're saying to us in Your Word today. Amen.

I'll take you back a few years to 1778, the month this January. The American Continental Army is in Valley Forge in a holding pattern, a war of attrition between the Brits, who had all the money and all the equipment but couldn't control the land. And the Americans who were fighting for their freedom.

The troops in Valley Forge, as you may know, didn't all have tents or cots. They didn't all have winter coats. They didn't even all have shoes. They didn't have proper food. They were happy many days to get cornmeal mush for breakfast. While the British troops, who had the wealth of

the empire their disposal, stayed in warm homes nearby and had all the food they could eat and perfect clothing, 2500 men out of the 10,000 man army died that winter of things like typhus and various other fevers, troubles, smallpox, scurvy. I wonder how did they survive? How did they survive? It's a good question. If it was difficult to survive in 1778, it was even harder to be a Christian in Rome. In 70 A.D.. Hebrews written to Christians in Rome around 68, 69, 70 A.D. for some number of years it had been possible to be a quiet Christian and be ignored or overlooked by the Kingdom of Rome. But as time went by, there were more Christians, and they got into debates with Jews and an emperor. Claudius expelled all the Christians from Rome around 52 A.D. out you go. And by the way, will take your property, your houses, as you go to most of them drifted back, and other Christians settle in Rome. The church was growing and there was a fire in Rome. And Nero, who was in the worst phase of his leadership as emperor, decided to blame it on the Christians and was killing them simply for being Christians. And Hebrews writes to people in that spot. Now in the West there's some negativity or, light pressure on Christians. There are still Christians throughout the world, you understand, that are facing these very same problems. We pray for them in this church, week by week. We have a prayer for Suffering Christians group, and they live in countries like India and China, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Iraq, Iran, Syria. This passage is life for them. Jesus is the author and the perfecter of our faith. But of course everybody has troubles. Jesus said, in this world you will have trouble.

In this world you will have tribulation. So everybody needs to know that Jesus is the author of their salvation and the perfecter. That is to say, you're not on your own. Now the question is, how do you get the strength to endure when you're being persecuted? Hard core again, when troubles really mount up and the world has an answer?

Secular society says, here's what you do get a good night's sleep, proper nutrition, get some exercise, spend your time with life giving people, and so forth. And that's perfectly good advice. But of course, the question is what if you can't get any food? What if you can't sleep well because you're on the run for your life? What then?

Or right here? What if you can't sleep well? What if you're filled with fears? What then? Well, then. Then we look to Jesus, the author and the perfecter of our faith. He's saying this the world society says, look inward to your resources. Look to your strength, your wisdom, to your nutrition, to your exercise regime. Look to your friends.

Nothing wrong with looking to your friends or eating well. But the passage in front of us says you primarily look not within and don't look primarily at the opposition. You primarily look to Jesus as he awaits you at the finish line of life, as he will carry you to the end, to the goal of life. Whatever your hardships may be.

It's telling us we're going to learn to look to the future. Don't look to the present. Look to the future. Now. As Christians, we look to three time frames who look to all three. We look to the past. Of course. We look to the past, to the covenants of God, the promises of God to the incarnation, the coming of Christ at Christmas and his life, his miracles, his teaching, his handling of conflict, his death, his resurrection.

Of course, we look to the past. We look to our past. The day when we became a believer, or the day when we became serious about our faith. Maybe we. Maybe you grew up as a Christian as far back as you know, but there's probably a moment of quickening when you said, this is my faith. It's not just the faith of my parents, and it's good and right to look to your past, and it's good and right to look to the present.

That is to say, what God is doing your life right now, what you're learning, how you're growing. But Hebrews especially says yes, yes, and also look to the future, because the future will spur you on the future in which Christ is awaiting us, telling us he will perfect us and bring us to the finish line. Look there now.

Hebrews 12, as you know, follows a chapter of the Bible, sometimes known as Hebrews 11. And you may read Hebrews 11 and know it as the story of the heroes of the faith. And so you think, oh, well, then we're looking to the past now. Yes, we are, but as Hebrews 11 describes the heroes of the faith, it largely describes here is the faith who are looking to the future.

For example, it mentions Noah. What did he do? He built an ark for 120 years because God said, one day it will rain. He was preparing really almost everything we know about him. He was preparing for that day. What about Abraham? Well, Abraham lived his life on the basis of three promises. God spoke to him almost the minute he met him.

I will give you a son. I will give you a land, and you will be a nation, a blessing. The nations will, will, will. And in his life he received, he received the son a tiny little parcel of land. He lived his life in faith, trusting God's future. Or think about Moses. He's another one of the heroes of the faith.

What did Moses do? He led the people of Israel out of the Promised Land and got to the edge of the Promised Land, but didn't actually enter. The people entered, and he did not. I or think about Joseph is also in Hebrews 11. As he died, he said, bury my bones and take my bones with you, because one day I want my bones to be buried in the promised land for a hundred years.

His bones way, that is, are all people that looked to God's future, to what God would do. The fulfillment of God's promises. There's no promise of ease during that time. We're going to put a couple of verses up here. He mentions Hebrews, mentions various heroes of the faith. He says, I don't have time for getting. And Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel and the prophets.

And then he goes on to say a moment later, you know, these are people verses three and 34. These are people who conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions tiny bit more, and quenched the power of fire, and escaped the sword. Now what that means is we have we have references to people like David who conquered kingdoms.

But when it says they escaped lions, we're thinking of Daniel, who's in the lion's den. People escaped flames. That would be Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, his friends. They escaped. They endured. It goes on to say, floggings and jeering. And many of them died. And as they escaped. So some one great victories and some are faithful and great hardship, and they escaped, and others did not escape, and they perished, but they all looked forward to another city, the New Jerusalem.

It looked forward to God's future for them, even if, like Isaiah and John the Baptist, they died for their testimony. Even like by this time, James and Peter and probably Paul had all died for their faith in Christ by this time. But they believed God was building a better city. They were looking forward to the city that has foundations that God himself planted.

That is how they endured. So faith, of course, is more than a hope. It's a it's a certainty. And what God's going to do and believing he'll finish our walk. We make use of the means of grace to do so. Now, what are the means of grace? Well, it says in chapter 12, verse one of we can pop that on the screen for a moment.

It says in chapter 12, verse one, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, and therefore let us run notice it says we, we are surrounded by witnesses. Let us lay aside every weight. Let us run with endurance. The race is set before us. People sometimes say Christianity is not an individual sport. It's a team sport.

Notice the we, us, us, us now the US is not just people around us, although it is. We persevere in the Christian life because of our friends who help us. But to us that's in mind. Here is this cloud of witnesses. Who are they? Well, they're the people we heard about in Hebrews chapter 11, and all the others who can witness to God and say, God carried me through to the end, and he will carry you to now.

These are witnesses who are surrounding us. We might say they're cheering us on. And if you've played sports, you know there's two kinds of crowd. There's the crowd that comes and doesn't know the sport. They're there because their son or their grandson or daughter granddaughter, and they're playing lacrosse and they've never played lacrosse, and they know nothing about lacrosse or the ADRs of hockey.

And so they're cheering. Way to go, young man, young woman. And they have no idea what they're cheering for. But then there's the other kind of person who has played that sport and knows exactly how hard it is to keep going, knows exactly how hard that moment, that play, that

disappointment really is. And these are not spectators, does not say we're surrounded by a cloud of spectators.

It says we're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, that is to say, people who are in it with us, who were in the same race of the Christian life. But there's a little bit more to it. And the little bit more is that, there's a word that's used for witness, and the word is marked to go, and it basically means testifiers, a good translation, if the word testifier were used commonly at all in English, would be we are surrounded by a great cloud of testifiers.

They testify to God and that word testify. March a row actually appears five times in chapters 11 and 12, but most of the time it's translated commend or attest. And what the passage says is that Abel, Cain and Abel was attested or commended by God, and it says that Enoch was attested or commended by God. And it says that the heroes of the faith, all of them, chapter 11, verse five, were attested by God.

And again it says at chapter 1311, verse 39, all these were attested are coming up of God. And what it means is this God is testifying to Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and David and Enoch, and God is testifying to them. They finished. They finished well, and they are testifying to God. God helped us finish well.

The witnesses testify to God. You can finish the race because God is with us. And God says, yes, they did. Yes they did. God testifies and God will testify to all who truly call on Christ, and all who view him as the perfecter of their faith. You will you will testify in public this man, this woman was faithful to me, to the end.

Now then, it describes the race. It says, we look to Jesus, we look to Jesus, but we also run our race. We run the race set out before us. We run. Let's just take the words apart little by little. In verse one. Question number one who runs? We ourselves run. We plural. We all run, all Christians run. We run.

The race is marked out for us as long as it goes. And I have to tell you, the Christian life is not a sprint. It's not 100 or 200. It's a marathon. As long as life itself. If you've ever been in endurance sports, this is an endurance sport. How do we run? We run. We run with endurance. Why do we run?

We run because we are surrounded by this cloud of witnesses who are testifying to God. How do we run? We run. Throwing off every weight the sin we lay aside every weight. The sin which sin which clings so closely. So you know runners, you know how they operate, right? If you see them before the race, they've got shoes on there.

Maybe five, six, seven ounces. They've got socks that were a quarter of an ounce, and they've got various other garments that wear as little as they possibly can. The total weight that they're

running with might be 9 or 10oz, maybe 12oz. No one goes running in galoshes. Galoshes, by the way, is the weirdest word I could think of for heavy shoes.

No one goes running in cowboy boots. Nobody goes on a marathon with snowshoes on you. Throw away every weight. What's the weight? What's the hindrance? The hindrance is sin. Now it doesn't say sins. It doesn't say every all the sins. Which would then make us think, okay, what's the list of sins? You know, pride and greed and envy and lust and anger and lying and so forth.

It doesn't say that we aren't supposed to think of sins. We're supposed to think sin. Whatever sin you commit, whatever sin there is, that will weigh you down. And so throw it aside. As you strive to run your race effectively laid aside. How do we run? We run with endurance. As long as it goes. Where do we run?

We run. The race that is set for us or marked for us really could be translated, appointed for us. Everybody here has a different race, right? Some of you grew up in a home with a loving mother and father who constantly affirmed you, but also pushed you and tested you and corrected you, and then loved you and affirmed you and fed you and clothed you and watered you, and did everything to make life as good as possible.

I had the best parents in the world. Praise God and others have parents who were neglectful or parents are divorced. When you were 4 or 24, or parents who fought all the time, or parents who died, and our trail varies. We go into unexpected places. Sometimes you find yourself living in Alabama for 20 months, which you never really anticipated.

I didn't mind it. I didn't expect it either. The Lord has a race marked out for us, and as we do, we keep our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith. We don't. We don't look at the adversaries. We look at the troubles we keep our eyes on. Jesus are running toward him. We have a goal.

We're running toward the finish line. But it's not a it's not a line. It's a person at the end running toward Jesus. He is, as I said last week, the author or hero or champion of our faith. He's the one who blazed the trail. He's the one who put to death, the one who holds the power of death and kept us in fear of death.

But he's also the perfecter. That is to say, he doesn't simply tell us to run or say, I've cleared the path. There it is. Go run in it. He also perfects us as we run. Let me use, a swimming illustration. So some years ago, when my children were little, my middle child was probably our weakest swimmer. At the age of seven, they could all swim at seven, but she was the weakest and she had the greatest desire to go off the diving board.

And you know, the rules of pools. You can't just go off the diving board. You have to demonstrate you can swim the length of the pool, which was a little bit dubious for her. And so we talked and she said, I really want to do it. I said, are you sure you're good enough? No, I'm not sure. So when I'm swimming, I want you to be with me, dad.

And I said, okay, I'll be with you. you'll be in the water and I'll be right here on the edge of the pool. We talked about it three times last time. I'm going to be right here. My toes will be over the edge of the pool. If you're struggling, I'll come right in, she said. That's not really what I want.

I want you in the pool with me, I said. If I'm in the pool with you, I have to keep enough distance that the lifeguard who's evaluating you knows that I'm not helping. I can't push you, I can't pull you. I can't put my hand under your tummy. If you start to go, you know, down. you're on your own, she said, I know that.

I just want you to be with me. Now, listen, that's kind of like. It's kind of like the way a lot of people think about the Christian life. Jesus is on the edge of the pool and you say, no, Jesus, I want you to be in the pool with me. But you think it's still up to you to swim, and we are responsible to swim.

But Jesus doesn't just stand there saying, swim, swim! He says, I will help you. I will push you, I will pull you. I will put my hand under you for how falter I will take you to the end. I am the author and the perfecter of your faith. Jesus is the author and the perfecter, and he does this.

The text says, for the joy that was set before him, and he endured the cross. Now when it says, for the joy set before him, we think Jesus did all this because he knew the joy he would have in the reward he would receive for the magnificent work he did on the last day. And that is true. But it's not the main point here.

The main point here comes from Sara Greek. Again, the word for in this case is anti, which almost always means instead of or in place of doesn't mean for the advantage of it. It means instead of, which then would mean that Jesus died. Instead of keeping the joy he had in heaven, he chose to enter this world to be our author and our perfecter.

And he did it because with the father in eternal glory he laid aside, gave up, sacrificed the joy he had before him at that point, and chose to take on the cross instead. And he knew he knew how much it would hurt. He knew how hard it would be. He knew how shameful it would be. And it says he despised the shame, which means he thought very little of it.

He understood the shame. And he said, it's pitiful compared to the glory of doing what the father and the son and the spirit have together resolved to do from eternity to eternity. Jesus

chose that, and now he is sit at the right hand, seated at the right hand of God the Father, ruling over the world and awaiting the day when all is restored.

The next verse tells us that what Hebrews is actually worried about is weariness. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary, faint hearted. That is, if we look at Jesus enough, Jesus did not grow weary and faint hearted. He's our hero. He's our model. He is. He's the one who opened the path to God, but he's also the way of God.

So you watch how he endured and you can endure. Because the danger is weariness and faint heartedness. So think of it this way. When work is going poorly and you're discouraged by that, have your skills at work evaporated? They have not, but your will to use them may have grown weak. If you're studying as a student and you know you entered the program, a master's program, whatever it might be a voluntary program, you don't have to do it or PhD.

And you think to yourself, I'm never going to use this. I'm never going to. There's no value in this. I'm just going to give up. Did you suddenly become stupid? No. The danger is you became faint hearted or weary. Don't grow weary. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Verse four says it's kind of a slap in the face. He says, listen, in your struggle or combat against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.

You're not even bleeding yet, and you're thinking about giving up. It's going to get worse, he says. Cheer up. Things are going get worse. So keep your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith. The question comes up again, so how do we do that? Well, we keep our eyes on Jesus. Is that all? Is there anything in this life?

Well, we mentioned, you know, sleeping well and eating well, but I'm going to say to you again, we run the race that is marked out for us. It's corporate. Let me tell you story about it. So when I was 29 years old playing basketball fervently, I had a really bad fall on a basketball court and tore up my ankle, broke it.

Torn ligaments all around, bone chips was terrible and recovery was awful. It took nine months. My left leg was visibly atrophied after nine months and I began to think, okay, it's getting a little better. I'm going to start to run a little bit. I had never gone running. I ran on a basketball court or a tennis court or a football field, but had never been a runner.

And so I said, I'm going to run. And I ran a half a mile one day and I ran a mile, had a friend named John who was we played basketball together. He was a runner mostly, and I told John, hey, I'm running. I ran a mile. And he said, well, let's run together. And so we ran a mile and a half, and then we ran two miles and then we ran two and a half miles.



He said, hey Dan, there's a, there's a ten K, that's 6.2 miles. In case you don't know, there's a ten K coming in two weeks. Let's run it together. It'll be fun. Now, if anybody here knows anything about running, you do not go from being a cripple to running 6.2 miles in five weeks, if you have any sanity.

But in my 20s, I did a lot of really foolish things. This is one of them, John said. It'll be fun, I trusted John, it'll be fun. So I start running in first two miles we did in about 14 minutes, which was which felt right, but preposterous for how much fitness I had at the moment, how my leg felt.

And then in mile three, everything fell apart. My my leg was hurting, I got a cramp on my side, I got a spasm and, people became began to pass us. And I don't mean good runners. I mean bad runners. People that were manifestly overweight, that had bad running gear, black mesh outfits, people ten, 15 years older than us.

And I would think this is horrendous. These people are passing us, these men, these women are passing us. We're. So I'd I'd pick it up and pass them and then everything would start hurting again. And I said at the 3.1, the turn around, he said, John, listen, just abandon me, leave me beside the road and I'll just curl up and die.

And you have a great race and I'm ruining it for you. And John said, is this gonna be fine? I said, we'd run together, we're going to run together and it's going to pass. You're going to be fine. It's the cramps going to go away and a while later, not extreme. Then me, a half a mile later, it finally passed and with the end to pass, the roly poly men and women with the black mesh outfits, we felt good about that.

And then John said, you see that guy up there in the sprite striped hat? I said, I see him. He said, no, not that guy, that guy. So not the guy 75 yards ahead, the guy 250 yards ahead, I see, I see him. I said, he said, we're going to finish the race ahead of him. Okay. Then we take off and we're doing better and we pass the first try.

To be fair, we passed a second striped hat with a mile to go and the timekeeper barks out the time and John says, Hey Dan, you're doing great. I'll see you at the finish line. And he took off and within it felt like within 15 seconds he was 75 yards ahead of me and passed 19 people. But I was feeling good.

And so I kept running and I said, I'm going to finish next to John. And I had a lot of people to pass and it was, you know, ten and then there's five left, and then the last couple of blocks is four, three, two, one. And then when we started seeing the people who'd run and done really

well, you know, the people came in fourth and 11th and they're stretching and they're soaked with sweat and they look like elite runners.

And one of them fixed his eyes on me, and he could tell that I had something I wanted to accomplish, even though I was, you know, not in the lead pack by any means. And he said, come on, finish with nothing left. And my hair caught fire, my feet sprouted wings, and I finished half a step behind John.

Now, how did I do that? Well, first of all, I did it because of John. If John had not stayed with me, I most certainly would have quit at 2.7 miles beyond a shadow of a doubt. And then there were those runners at the end that looked like they had finished with nothing left, and they didn't know me, but they said, I cheer you on.

And they didn't just cheer on a spectator. They cheered on us witnesses. They were basically saying with their sweat drenched bodies. I finished with nothing left and there's a glory in it, and I want you to. That's the Christian life. The Christian life is a team sport. It's a team sport that we play together. Following Jesus, the author who clears the path and the perfecter who carries us through the path.

And he appoints the Holy Spirit. But he also appoints our brothers and sisters. That's why we emphasize fellowship and discipleship and togetherness in the body of Christ. Now the Christian life is kind of like a race, and it's kind of not like a race. We get cramps. Certainly we want to quit the times we have friends, we're partners.

We're surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Again, you know. Those heroes of the faith, Abraham, Moses, David. They say God carried us through the end. He'll carry you through to the end as well. That's what the Bible says. Things like encourage one of another. Daily is warns us today and don't. Don't abandon the assembling together of believers. And those friends may actually rebuke you along the way.

They may say, hey friend, you're struggling, but I got to tell you, you're giving in to weariness and faith all the wounds of friends, says the Bible. And let me tell you, it's time to get going. On the other hand, the Bible also says we bear one another's burdens. Which burden in this case means a load that's a little too much for one person.

And one day a friend may say to you, stop being. Stop giving in to discouragement. Another day they may say, this burden is too much for you to bear. I will bear it for you. I am with you.

If you look at the here's the faith, you notice something else to you. Notice that Joseph, faithful as he was, was betrayed by his brothers. You notice that Moses, although he led the people across the desert to the Promised Land, was the target of endless grumbling and complaining.

David defeated the great foes of Israel, but he was hated for no reason whatsoever except sheer jealousy by his brothers and then by his king.

Peter and James and Paul planted churches, and then died. It's not easy. And if some people hear the words, and I think some of you will hear these words finished with nothing left, others may hear words more like one more step brother, one more step sister. Or you may hear words like, I will never leave you, and I will never forsake you.

Or he may say to you, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. We walk different paths. And we wait. And the waiting. You know Abraham waited for a child. And I think there's supposed to be a hint for us. Sometimes our waiting has to do with family, has to do with giving birth to a child or a child who's wandered and strayed, and relationships are shattered, and we have to wait for that.

And there's Moses, who had a great task of leading the people to the Promised Land. There was grumbling. There was failure. He received the Ten Commandments, and when he came back down, they're already going after idols. How difficult it is the prophets who told the truth paid the price. So they teach us. Moses teaches us. If we're in the middle of a great task, God will help you with that task.

And if it's hard to tell the truth, and sometimes it is, behold the prophets and apostles who told the truth when it was so hard. Jesus is our champion in all this. He's our perfecter and all these things.

Jesus shows the path he cleared the path. He is the path. It's all three. He's the author. He's the perfecter. Let me say it differently. As much as we admire our pastors and our leaders past and our pastor, future, there's no man, no woman who's the author and perfecter of the faith. Jesus is the one. And then God appoints leaders underneath him.

He appoints friends underneath Christ who keep running with us. Don Carson written many, many books. Beloved thinker founded a movement called the Gospel Coalition that's been around for about 25 years now. Maybe a little bit less 21 years. And he had this comment about movements that arise. He said, when a movement arises, the first generation is rediscovering the gospel.

The second generation assumes the gospel. The third generation, and can forget the gospel. Now, that's especially true of parish church ministries. But I say, let's make sure as we go through the generations of this church to keep on rediscovering the gospel, keep on coming back to Jesus, the author, the perfecter of our faith in our system. I'm going to be a Presbyterian for a second.

Presbyterians are really good at holding each other accountable. We're not independent agents. God is enable us to find a way to keep from straying. Let's lay hold of that. Let's be a worshipping community that has a mission. It stays true to that mission, and that mission is to hold on to Jesus. The author and the perfecter of our faith.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word and the way you inspired the author of Hebrews to tell us things we need to know so we can be disciples and act like it so that we can follow Jesus and by your grace look more like him. As we stand up and sit down and walk in the way.

But more than that, Lord, help us to keep our eyes on the gospel on you we pray in your name, Lord Jesus, the founder of our faith, the one who carries us through the end. I pray in your name. Amen.