

Rob Looper
“Looking Forward; Running for the Joy Set Before Us”
Hebrews 13:1-14

If you would remain standing in preparation for the reading of God's Word. If you're able, I'd like to ask you to turn to Hebrews chapter twelve or scroll on your device. However, you may have the Word of God delivered to you. Here, as we begin this new year, having ended the year looking back as Pastor Park looked at Joshua this morning, we're going to be looking forward tonight. We'll be talking about living in the present. We've got everything covered. And as we begin this new year, of course we look at these new opportunities and we look forward, and there's nothing better for us as we do that than to start with God's Word. So we'll be reading verses one through fourteen and I ask you to follow along. Please pay careful attention. This is God's holy word. It is inerrant.

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, and your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons, my son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time, as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated.

Well, it's a new year and we expect with a new year, new resolutions, new aspirations, new hopes, new opportunities. Many of us, it's as if intuitively, we've sort of taken Anne of Green Gables line about tomorrow, if you're familiar with it. And we annualize it. It's a new year, fresh and with no mistakes. Well, it doesn't take long for Eeyore to come along and pop that balloon. And that appears to be with good reason. Every day brings wilder and more amazing news. We hesitate to ask what else could happen because we're afraid of the answer. Who would have thought a week ago that we'd have the headlines we have today? And yet God's Word tells us

over and over again to look forward. To look to the future. That his mercies are new every morning and that we are to press on in faith. Perhaps that's one of the reasons God unfolds each year as he does. We all too easily trust in temporary and material things to provide what only God's grace in Christ can supply. Confidence that our days, day after day have meaning. Assurance that God is there and he is in control. Peace in knowing God's real love for us. Hope that everything is going to be okay. Joy in the knowledge that better days really are coming and being okay, and knowing that perhaps those days may not be in our lifetime, but they're coming. So with all that in mind, Happy New Year. And with it comes the same opportunities for us to throw aside all the stuff that keeps us from fixing our eyes straight ahead, to look forward to what? To who matters most. And that's Jesus. So we must run the race that God in Christ has set out for us. This is a familiar passage of Scripture to everyone here. I'm sure most of us have heard sermons on that and been exhorted to run the race. But what really is the race? Well, it's a metaphor that the writer of Hebrews and I will put you on warning here. I'm going to struggle to not say Paul, because I'm convinced Paul wrote Hebrews, and someone reminded me after the first service, I'm in good company. Dr Barker believed that. So, uh, but I have written here our writer instead of Paul. So, uh, we'll see what happens. Uh, the writer of Hebrews uses this metaphor here because his audience would have been familiar with this metaphor of the games of athletics. As of sports. It was a culture that was obsessed with athletics, the Greek games. They knew all about them. Paul uses lots of metaphors that refer to athletic games. And here he is doing it again. Now, this whole sports inspired metaphor is important because of the exhortation, and every point of it is used to that end. The saints mentioned in chapter eleven, they're the spectators, a veritable host, this cloud of witnesses that are that are in the arena. They testify to God's faithfulness in their own lives and serve as inspiration to those who are now contestants here. The Hebrews through the ages, believers and us today in the present race that is before us. So we'll say a little bit more about the Saints in that hall of faith a bit later. But let's do first exactly what the writer does for us. Exhort us to fix our eyes on Jesus as we consider the race that is set before us. And we must run because Jesus paved the way for us. In verse two he says that Jesus, who has founded and perfected our faith, is the one that we have to look to for the joy that was set before him. He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God. Two descriptors here that he founded our faith, that he perfected it. What is he getting at? The word translated founder is a word that can be understood as pioneer or trailblazer. You think, perhaps, of someone hacking their way through a jungle where no one has ever been creating a path, a safe passage for those to follow behind after. And that's the idea here. Paving the way, cutting a path into the very throne room of God, as it were.

Look back at Hebrews nine, because that is the context here of this statement. Hebrews nine verse eleven, when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. So Jesus did what no earthly Levitical priests could ever do. He entered into the presence of God as the final true high priest, to offer himself as the final perfect sacrifice, sinless. in everything. Now Jesus, having gone before us on behalf of even all those saints mentioned in Hebrews eleven, we also may

enter in the very presence of God by faith in Christ, because he was the trailblazer. He cut the path. He founded the faith. Now let's look at the second descriptor. That is, that Jesus is the one who paves the way for us by perfecting our faith. It's a little different idea, and it's a nuance of the first one. Here, the writer seems to have constructed a new form of a word that essentially means to complete, and he did so to indicate that Jesus completed what was necessary for us to justify our faith in him. It wasn't merely a work that we could never do. It was a work that could only be fully accomplished by Christ. And he did it on our behalf. If you look at now chapter ten in Hebrews. Verse eleven, every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. He perfected, he completed. Or as Jesus Himself said in John 19:30, it is finished. And so we run the race with the assurance that our endurance is not in vain, because, as the hymn says, we know the outcome is secure. But more specifically, Jesus assures us that he himself is the way. It isn't just that he paved the way, founded the faith, perfected it. John 14:6 he says, I am the way the word is. There is the same word for road. I am the way, the truth, and the life. So it's no surprise, then, that the book of acts records that the early church called the faith the way. Jesus is the way, inasmuch as he also paved the way. Now I'm really taken by Paul's bold assurance to look forward, especially as he writes from prison in the book of Philippians to press on.

Now in Philippians three, if you would turn there. We've already seen verses seven through eleven in our confession of truth this morning, where Paul states that he has zero confidence in any righteousness that comes through his flesh, that is, by his own accomplishments or his own ability. Instead, he considers all self value, self ability a loss in favor of the righteousness which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness that from God that depends on faith. So that, as he says in verse eleven, by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Now it's important for us to understand that last phrase by any means possible is not at all a sign of any doubt on Paul's part, but is actually a statement of confidence. It sounds like he might be saying, well, you know, if there's some chance that I'll attain to the resurrection, I hope I have it. So the idea is not if there is any possible chance, but instead through every circumstance that God takes me. It's the same idea as what he says in Philippians four thirteen that he can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. He can meet all situations he has secured by Christ and he may move forward with that confidence. Now he emphasizes that very assurance. In verse twelve he says, not that I have already obtained this, that is, that is at its fulfillment, or I'm already perfect. But I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I love the way the new American standard translates this last part. I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. It's a little awkward sounding, but you get the picture. Almost the idea that Christ has seized us and he has grabbed us and is holding on to us. It's a powerful way of showing confidence. And now we press on to realize the consummate, if you will, that for which we have been seized by Christ. After the first service. Mark Travers handed me a note from J.I. Packer's Knowing God. It says something that he would remember this just off, off the face of things. **You are not strong enough to fall away if God is resolved to hold you. If**

Christ has seized you and laid a hold of you, nothing, not even you, can shake you from his grip. So that's Paul's bold confidence. To persevere, to endure, to press on. Look at what he says in verse one thirteen. ***One thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*** We can run the race with endurance, because we know even the sin that clings so tightly that we'll look at in a moment will not cause us to stumble, as to fall so that we never finish the race. We run because we know by God's grace we will in fact, finish the race. Because Jesus has run the course before us. He's cleared the way of everything that would prevent us from getting there. And he's registered our names at the finish line.

But don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not suggesting that it's just passive. Well, Jesus has won the race, and we just kind of gamble along in life. If you're a Christian, one thing we know is you just don't gamble. In this world. It's hard. The path is rough. It's exhausting. Sometimes it requires endurance and perseverance. But we run because Jesus prepares us to run, and he does so by coaching us for the race. Now, I chose this word carefully because it's an athletic context. That is the metaphor that's being used here. And of course, because that culture was obsessed with sports in many ways, like us, it fits for us. Go, Hoosiers basically. It's important for us to understand what Jesus is doing and instructing us. He is coaching us in the game. And I like to think of passages like this as the Lord's coaching us in the race and propelling us toward maturity, even as we run to learn from all those things that are in the path. First, he calls us to lay aside every weight. Back in Hebrews twelve verse one. ***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*** What does it mean to lay aside every weight? Well, it's an interesting phrase again, in light of this metaphor of running a race, because historically, Greek runners in their context, contests ran either as close to naked as possible or naked, so that they were completely stripped down with no impediment in their running. And so he seems to be making that reference here, to strip down and to throw away all those things which would serve as impediments, as hindrances in our race. F.F. Bruce notes that what may be an impediment to one may not be an impediment to another. And so knowing what weighs one down is spoken of here generally, and probably not to be seen as something sinful. It could, in fact be something good, as Pastor mentioned last week, as the Israelites had come across the Jordan, there are good things that sometimes we can put too much priority on, or we need to prioritize in a different way and lay aside because they may cause us to be distracted. Perhaps that's why the writer uses the verb that is translated looking in verse two, because it implies two actions, both a looking away and a looking toward, emphasizing the impossibility of looking in two directions at once. As much as we try, we can't do it in running our race. We must be focused, not distracted, able to lay aside those things that would make us, as James says, double minded rather than single minded. Next, he says, we are to lay aside the sin which clings so closely. Now it's clear. Now he is talking about sin, but it's not likely that he's referring to besetting sins. As the King James translates we. We often look at this passage and hear people say, well, we need to find out what our particular besetting sin is. That's not what he is saying here. I believe he's talking about sin in general, although all of us may have some particular sin that we do struggle with. That's not the idea here. And the image is that it is sin that which entangles us because it clings

so tightly. It's essentially a call not to view sin lightly but seriously, and to recognize how closely it clings to us. You can't just shake it off. It takes effort. It takes ability to recognize an insight. It's more than an impediment. It's an entanglement. And the point, ultimately, is that we have to identify those things and remove them in a moment. We'll see why.

It's important for us to recognize how the body of Christ is a part of that. But there is more here, and it isn't that the Lord is merely coaching us. He's fathering us, preparing us by disciplining us in the race. Look at verse five. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons, my son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him, for the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. The word translated discipline here is *paideia*. It uses. It is built off the word for child, *pedos*. When you think of pediatrician and the emphasis is not discipline as punishment, we look at this passage sometimes and get a little confused. It's not discipline as punishment, but discipline as training. Discipline as education. In fact, in classical Greek, the word for education is *paideia*. We are being shaped into fully mature people. That is what education. That's what discipline does. So *paideia* discipline is the privilege of sonship. It's crucial for the Hebrews and for us to understand, because our tendency is to see the hardships of life as either punishment or, worse, some kind of negative karmic thing. And that it's clear that the writer is suggesting that it is not the presence of hardships, but their absence that ought to cause the Hebrews and us concern. Discipline is the proof of sonship, the proof of our father's desire to equip and strengthen us. Verse eleven. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

I used to wonder when my father would send me and my brothers into the front yard -- because we had built our house in an old field, and it had been completely bulldozed -- to pick up rocks so that we could have a yard. I wondered why he hated us so much and why he would punish us so. But he was disciplining us with some hard work and with a vision to know that the good work would actually end up with something that we really loved. A good yard to throw a football in without falling and busting your knee. Discipline seems present and the difficulties of life in those he is disciplining us, our father in the race, and he's perfect in what he chooses for us to experience. This ought to be obvious, as he argues in verse nine and ten, if mere human fathers deserve respect for their fallen attempts at discipline, which they could be not enough, could be too much, or even wrong. How much greater should our respect be and submission to our Heavenly Father, our spiritual father, who disciplines us perfectly, that we may share his holiness. That's a sermon in itself right there. He disciplines us, and those difficulties are so that we may share in his holiness. Now, I want to point another thing out here in the text that may seem at first a bit geeky, or I should say geeky. Uh, but it's very important to see there are seventeen verbs in this passage. In these fourteen verses, fourteen of these verbs are plural, either first person or second person. Those three verbs that are not, by the way, are all actions of Christ in His work. But the other verbs are all exhortations to the Hebrews as a body, not as individuals. And inasmuch as this text addresses us, the same is true. God is exhorting us to see that we run this race together. So he is preparing us together by giving us one another. So we run and we compete, not individually as lone rangers or lone

runners, but together. And that's important that that metaphor sometimes might lead some of us to think that, well, running is not a team sport, but those who have been involved with track know that it very much is. Runners are usually on a team and on the team. There's a there's shared goals. The team wins or loses together. Even if individual runners score the points. There's interdependence. Teammates rely on each other for motivation, strategy, execution. Think of how a baton needs to be passed perfectly and there's collective effort. Individual performance is contribute to a larger team result, fostering unique bonds and support As in any team sport. There's this all for one, one for all mentality and esprit de corps that gives cohesion, unity, mutuality. Because we run together, especially for running this race that is set before us. We need each other. We cannot be individual embers without burning out. An ember must be part of a of a fire so that it can have warmth and glow and flame. So we need to know each other and to know each other well. As risky as it sounds, our weaknesses as well as our strengths. So we can pray, admonish, encourage, and sometimes even literally lift one another up to persevere in the race marked out to say, don't give up. Jesus has got this and he's got you. You know, it doesn't have to be dramatic either. I'm amazed at how often the Lord leads someone to send me a text, and they're prompted because of their sensitivity in knowing me or my situation, or knowing something I'm struggling with just to say, hey, I'm praying for you. I'm thinking of you. It's because they've cared enough to listen and to understand. We need each other and need to be involved in each other's lives, and it really gives fresh insight into verses twelve and thirteen. And again, these are plural verbs. Exhortations. ***Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet. That would be y'all's feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*** And the better we know one another, the more we can help one another. To keep things, as it were, in joint, so to speak. So we might run, as verse fourteen says, and strive together towards brotherly peace, personal holiness. It's interesting to think that we need one another for our own personal holiness, which we will share with God in fullness one day. Simply put, we're not running merely for ourselves. We're running together. We need each other to finish the course.

This past April, Brazilian runner Pedro Arrieta began the 2025 Boston Marathon with the goal of finishing in two hours and 40s. Now that's twenty six miles in two hours and 40s. And as he neared the finish line, it appeared that he was going to achieve his goal until he saw a runner on the ground. Some of you may have seen this video. Sean Goodwin had collapsed from exhaustion just six hundred and fifty feet from the finish line. While many runners pass by, they had a goal to achieve. Arrieta paused, helped Goodwin to his feet and supported him as they struggled together toward the finish. Though Arietta missed his goal by one minute and twenty nine seconds, he said, it reminded me that sports is much more collective than we think. It was impossible to run past someone who needed help reaching their dream finish line and not help them complete the Boston Marathon.

We're running such a greater race. And as we look forward to the finish line, it should be impossible for us to run past any of our brothers or sisters who we know needs help. Just listening and asking for God's wisdom will give us the impetus to know what we must do as we seek to lift each other up. But that brings us to what I consider to be the most important thing

that which enables us to truly help one another, to lay aside impediments, to deal with sin, and persevere on the path that Jesus paid for us. We run the race of faith with endurance ultimately, because Jesus provides our motivation. He does so first by leading others there before us again. Verse one. **Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with endurance.** not that he says, let us also, what he's saying is that we must do exactly what the cloud of witnesses, the old covenant saints listed in chapter eleven, do what they did. Look to the one who led them in their race to where they are now, the city that has foundations.

But it's fair to ask, how could they have fixed their eyes on Jesus when every one of these saints lived before him and never knew who Jesus was? Oh, but they did. They knew he was coming. Look back at chapter eleven, verse thirteen. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them, and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. It's clear that these old Covenant saints were living by faith, anticipating something they didn't have on this earth, and they knew it had to be given to them. Look down at verse 24 by faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. Now I know you've heard this, but think about it. They did not know precisely who or how or when, but these saints knew that they were being led by God, by their deliverer. He led them across the Jordan as he had led them across the Red sea. He led them in all of their life path and race, and they trusted him, knowing the fulfillment of the promises which doctor read detailed for us during advent? We understand, as F.F. Bruce said so powerfully, they did not really go before him. He went before them as truly as he has gone before us. Jesus is the founder and perfecter of all the saints faith, past, present and future. Which is exactly why the writer says what he does is he ends chapter eleven. All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. But that's not the ultimate point that that Jesus led others before. It's an inspiration, but it isn't the big idea. Look again, verse one. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses down at the end looking to Jesus. Though the Saints completion of their race is certainly motivation, it's inspiration and it's meant to be. They cannot do for us what only Jesus can do. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who will lead us in our race. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who gives us His Spirit to enable us to lay aside every weight and to deal with sin. And the only one standing at the finish line who will have been with us every step of the way is Jesus and Jesus alone. And so we run the race because Jesus has provided the ultimate motivation by setting himself as the joy that is before us. It's him. Now, it doesn't say it directly, but the sense and force of this exhortation is clear. Because of the joy that was set before him, Jesus ran his race, and because of the joy set before us, we must run our race. Well, what was the joy that was set before Jesus? It was a motivation, something on the other side of the cross which clearly propelled Jesus to endure all that. The cross was human shame, physical torture, and even the wrath of God. But in the final assessment, it was not the cross that was Jesus ultimate goal. It was, above all else, the joy that was set before

him beyond the cross. And we get a strong clue. I think the answer to what that joy was in Jesus prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night that he was betrayed. Known as the High Priestly Prayer.

So if you'll turn to John 17, we'll get a glimpse of that John.

He prays, father, the hour has come. Glorify your son, that the son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. Jesus is looking forward to being back with His Father in the glory he had with him before the world began. He's finished his work and now he's going home. But it isn't merely that Jesus looked only for his own restoration as the joy that was before him. It was by the cross that he would ultimately bring with him all those whom the father had given him to join with him in sharing in that joy, in that glory. Drop down to verse twenty four, father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. This is precisely why he came into the world, to make known the name of the father to the children, to redeem the ones given to him, and then to return with them to the father, so that they might enter into his joy, into his glory and perfect holiness.

Look back at Hebrews chapter two. We get another glimpse at Jesus anticipation as the writer quotes several Old Testament passages prophesying the incarnation. Look at chapter two, verse eleven for he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them us brothers, saying, I will tell of your name to my brothers. In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise. And look at the end of verse thirteen. This is the prophecy of Jesus standing in the presence of the father. As eternity begins, behold, I and the children God has given me. If you think that sounds like excitement on Jesus part, you're right. It's as if he is saying, father, I did it all we had planned, all I asked for. You gave me. Not one of them is missing. And here they are, part and parcel of the joy set before Jesus was this return to glory with us, so that we might share in that glory. And so Jesus sets himself anticipating our joining him before us as our joy, so that we may look to him with the same anticipation as we run this race with its sure Ending.

I love this little book by Michael Reaves called Come You Weary. Enjoy Christ's comfort. It's one of the best Christmas presents I got this year given to me by Drew Ricketts. Uh, I highly commend it. It's not long. It's an easy read, and it's incredibly comforting. Listen to what Dr Reeves writes. **If you are feeling spiritually low right now and that I would add weary in your race, then know for sure that you cannot heal yourself. Not one of us can breathe life into ourselves, however hard we try. Our spiritual sloth is a lack, a void that we cannot fill. Hard work, coffee, talent, excellent church programs. They only go so far. They are quick fixes and temporary. They merely mask the problem that we face when we're empty or feel we can't run.**

Another step. I would add what we need instead is to experience the life that is found only in Christ. And here's what he says we need a fresh vision. The enlightening site of the glory that confers vitality. That is the joy that is set before us. Jesus, who is the way, the truth, the life looking to Jesus. The joy set before us is not merely encouragement, it's empowerment. It is the enlightening side of the glory that confers vitality. It propels us to lift those drooping hands and to run, to rejoice in the assurance that in him, in Christ we are resting, we are running, and we are reigning. We're resting by faith in what he has laid on to us, for we're running by faith in the strength that he supplies in our weakness. And we're reigning, as it were, by faith in our union with him, even seated with him at the right hand of God. Assured that our faith will one day be sight, and we will see his glory face to face. Face in this race. He is not telling us to try harder, throw off more weight, work harder, sweat and grunt it out. He's saying, look to me. I have gotten you there. I will get you there. You will finish the race because I have done it for you. If you're here this morning and you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, and you're struggling to wonder what you have to do to gain God's approval, look to Jesus because he has done it for you. He did what you could never do. He paid the penalty for your sin and then gave you his righteousness. And now he's laid a course before you to run by faith. And he is faithful, and he will do it. And at the end he is waiting, as he is waiting for all of us. And then face to face.

Let's pray.

Oh Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are indeed the one who is at the end of our race. Even as you have been with us in the race, and you have laid Ahold of us before the race from the foundations of the world. Fill us with your spirit and strength in our weakness. Give us eyes and insight for our brothers and sisters, so that we might help lift up one another to run in you, toward you, and to your glory. We pray in your name.

Amen.