

RUN THE RACE

Genesis 12:1–2 • Pastor Luke Herche

Good morning again. Turn with me, if you would, in your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 through 2. That'll be our sermon text for this morning, Hebrews 12 verses 1 through 2. Before we read that together, let's pray together one more time.

Our Father, we thank you for your Word and your truth and your Son and your Spirit. Father, we pray that you would right now pour out your Spirit on us, to open your Word to us, that by your Spirit, you would point us to Jesus that we would see Him clearly, that we would rejoice in Him more fully, that we would rest in Him every moment of every day of our lives. Father, pour out your Spirit to that end. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Hebrews 12 just verses 1 and 2:

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.

The man named John Stephen Akhwari represented Tanzania in the marathon in 1968, and his performance has gone down in history, though he came in dead last. Because of the altitude where he was running, he got leg cramps early on, which were painful, but he kept running. He then got into a tussle with other runners, jockeying for position, and he ended up on the ground gashing and dislocating his knee. And while 18 other runners ended up dropping out of the race, he kept going. An hour after the winner, he literally limped over the finish line. And when asked why he kept going, he famously said "My country did not send me 5000 miles to start the race. They sent me 5000 miles to finish the race." Well, we're going to talk about running and finishing this morning, and as you can see by that story, running and finishing is no easy thing. There are many obstacles, and many choose to drop out along the way. And so, we're going to talk about how to run. I want to just give you three instructions this morning to run well and keep in the race. Three very simple instructions that we'll find in the text. First is dress right, then run straight, and then eyes up. Dress right, run straight, eyes up.

First dress right.

Have you ever tried to run in a snowsuit? You know what happens when little kids run in snow suits; they end up doing faceplants in the snow like that kid in *A Christmas Story* who begins to weep because he can't get up. Wearing the right clothes for the occasion can be a matter of success or failure. Most people probably don't weld in swim trunks or go deep sea diving in a tuxedo. What you wear can hinder or help what you do, which is why our author exhorts us in verse 1, **let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely**. Now we'll come back to the cloud of witnesses in a moment, but the main exhortation of these two verses in this passage is to lay aside and run. Now to "lay aside" is related to the language of clothing. So when Stephen was stoned in the book of Acts, this language is used in Acts 7:58, we're told that **the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul**, or "laid aside their garments," it could be translated. Metaphorically, this word is used in Ephesians 4:22, where we are exhorted to put off our old selves. And you can see why this works, because if you're going to run a race, you don't want to be wearing a heavy backpack and restrictive clothing. In fact, the ancient Greeks exercised and competed nude, possibly in part for this purpose; nothing would hinder their athletic pursuit. Modern day Olympic swimmers will go so far as to shave their heads and their bodies to remove even the tiniest impediment to their performance.

Now the obvious question for us is this: what is hindering our pursuit of God? What is getting in the way? And there are plenty of exhortations in Scripture to remove those hindrances, to put them off, to put them away, to lay them aside and o Ephesians 4:22 says **put off your old self**, Colossians 3:8 says **put away anger**, James 1:21 says **put away all filthiness**, 1 Peter 2:1 says, **put away all malice**. And Jesus has even stronger language in Matthew 5. He says, **If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, [...] And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away**. [Matthew 5:29-30].

Our writer this morning points to two things to lay aside: 1. **every weight**, and 2. **sin which clings so closely**. Now these could be the same thing, the **sin which clings so closely** could be explaining every weight, but most interpreters take it as two distinct things. It's helpful to see it this way because there are things in this life besides indwelling sin itself which at times must be set aside to run our race. Various passages in Scripture, various writers call it different things, but in the end, that weight that must be set aside is the same thing, or at least the same category of things. Sometimes it is called the cares of this life. Jesus warns in Luke 21. He says, **watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap**. [Luke 21:34]. Or one of the unfruitful soils that Jesus describes in Matthew 13. He says, **As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but**

the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful [Matthew 13:22]. So do the cares of this world weigh you down? Do they hinder you from serving Jesus? Now the danger is, of course, it's often difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the cares of this life as Jesus is talking about it and legitimate responsibilities. And yet, I don't think we have to make that distinction. The question is, do those cares stop you from obeying God, or do you entrust those cares to Him? Are you so caught up in the concerns of this present age that you have no time or energy or resources left for the concerns of the age to come? And Jesus specifically, in that Matthew 13 passage mentions the deceitfulness of riches as one care, because money is the currency of this age. And to have money is often to have power or fame or pleasure. Money promises us everything, but of course its promises are empty. And so, the question for us becomes, "Are you overly concerned with money?" Now this care is not limited to one class, don't mistake, poor and rich alike, can be overly concerned with money. The question is not "How much do you have?" but "How much do you think about it?" or "How much do you believe its promises?" If you only had a little more, then life would be good, right? It's a lie. Jesus says riches are deceitful, don't believe it. So are you master and steward of your resources, or are your resources the master of you? Do they work for you, or do you work for them? John simply calls this weight "The world." 1 John 2: 15–16, he says, **Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.** And it comes in various forms: wanting to feel good, wanting to surround yourself with beauty, wanting to be loved or known or popular. John says it's the stuff of this world, it will pass away, it won't last. Again, the problem is not feeling good, or enjoying beauty, or being known or loved, the problem is setting our hearts on these things. Where is your heart set? What has weight in your heart and so weighs you down? Other times, Jesus calls this weight simply the self, or one's life. In Matthew 16, He says, **If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?** [Matthew 16:24–25] So whether we call it the cares of this life or the world, or oneself, when we cling to the stuff of this age, when we set our hearts on it, however good it may be in and of itself, it will hinder us from running the race. It will weigh us down.

So what is there in this life that weighs you down, that claims territory in your heart, that consumes your time and energy and money, and so hinders you from running the race? If someone were to suggest some Christian discipline, some way of drawing closer to Jesus, what is it that would stop you from that pursuit? What is it that would cause you to say, "Well, that sounds nice, but I can't because..." Lay it aside. Again, Jesus goes radical here, right, He says "cut off your hand" and "pluck out your eye." Now I think Jesus is speaking in hyperbole there, right don't go cut off

your hand or pluck out your eye, but you get the point. If you struggle, you need to take measures to get out of your life whatever might hinder you from pursuing God. So if you struggle with pornography, maybe you need to get rid of your Internet. If you struggle with needing approval, maybe you need to quit social media. If you struggle with money, maybe you need to cultivate generosity. If you struggle with loving beauty, maybe you need to practice simplicity. What is weighing you down? What is holding you back from a total pursuit of Jesus? Now, in one sense, the fact that this is weighing you down is really a symptom of your overvaluing it. We give things weight by overvaluing them, and so they weigh us down. Now our writer mentions not just the **weight of this world** but also the **sin which clings so closely**. This is where we get the phrase "besetting sin," by the way, the King James version says, **let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us**. And there are at least three, probably more, ways that Bible scholars take the word "sin" here. In the Greek, there's a definite article which is suggestive of some definite sin, and so some take it to be "indwelling" or "remaining sin," that is, the remnants of sin within us. Some take it to be the sin of apostasy in particular, which the Hebrews were tempted toward; this ever-present temptation to give up the faith because abandoning the faith looks easier than persevering in it. And some take it to be the sin that clings so closely to you, whatever that is, hence how the phrase "besetting sin" has entered into our vocabulary. And however we take it though, the point is clear: sin clings to us like clothing after an unexpected downpour; it restricts us, it constricts us, it distracts us. Whatever sin you have in your life, however large or small, it will hinder you in your race. Lay it aside.

Now "lay it aside" is a metaphor, isn't it. So what does that mean? Well, it means first and foremost determine in your heart that I'm not going to do this anymore; this is not my life; you renounce sin. And sometimes, maybe rarely but at least sometimes, that will be all it takes, like a decisive act of the will, empowered by the Spirit, where we just say, "That's it, I'm done with this." Often, though, that is just the beginning. The next step is to fight with it every step of the way. So you remove sources of temptation, and you find brothers and sisters to pray with and for you, you memorize Scripture, you confess your sins, you cling to the cross, you rely on the Spirit, you counteract the flesh by doing the very opposite of what your flesh would have you do, you give thanks for God's provision, you delight in God's glory, you rejoice in God's forgiveness, you participate in the life of the church, you prioritize word and sacrament, you prioritize fellowship with other believers. Now I know some of this is hindered somewhat by Coronavirus, but not all of it for sure. And you do what you can, you and be as creative as you need to be to make it happen. To fight sin with every resource that God has given to you. This is what it looks like to fight sin. Sometimes, after I've been swimming at Clinton Lake with Deborah and the boys, I get home and I start to take off my soaking wet T-shirt, and of course, it sticks to me. And I can just imagine how silly I look fighting with this wet T-shirt in the bathroom. That's a bit like sin sometimes: laying it aside isn't so simple; you can't simply take it

off. And so engage in the battle. Lay it aside, fight. Only then will you be dressed and ready to run. Not that this is something that you do one and done. It's a daily battle, it's a daily laying aside of sin, a daily decision to renounce sin and pursue God with all that you have and all that you are. And one last note here, you might think that this doesn't sound much like grace. I mean, daily battles? Renouncing sin? It sounds like war or worse, it sounds like works. But of course, it is grace that trains our hands for war. Titus 2:11–12 says, **For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.** Grace trains us to renounce ungodliness. Grace tells us to set those things aside, because only when we do that can we run, and only when we run can we finish. And so the first point is dress right.

Second point, run straight.

After exhorting us to lay aside every weight and sin, our writer exhorts us to run with endurance, the race that is set before us. And this exhortation really involves 3 exhortations: run the race, run the right race, and run the whole race to run the race. The Christian life is not sitting at the beach with a cocktail, it's a race, a battle, a competition of sorts. It's not like getting a Manny petty, it requires us to get our hands and feet dirty. You can't live the Christian life sitting on the bench. So the writer exhorts us, **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.** Now the Greek word underlying the word "race" means a conflict, contest, a debate, even a lawsuit. It's the Greek word from which we get the English word "agony." So the first point under run straight is simply this: that the Christian life is not passive; you must run the race. The Christian life takes effort, and that means sometimes you have to turn off Netflix and put down your Nintendo Switch and do things which require effort in order to run the race set before you. And of course, I'm speaking to myself. And yet, all the effort in the world won't help you if you're not running the right race. Imagine a runner well-trained, muscled tone, at the starting block in intensity readiness, anticipation, the gun fires, "Bang!", the runners take off, but this runner turns around and runs the other way. Now of course it's silly, right it would never happen. Except it actually happens with kids all the time, doesn't it? Have you ever watched little kids first learning to play baseball? Every once in a while, when they hit the ball instead of running the first, they run to third. They've got their directions all mixed up and they don't yet know the way the game is played. Normally, some coach or parent is on the sidelines shouting, "Go the other way!" They're running the wrong way. And so, running hard and fast is not the only thing we need to do. In fact, running hard in the wrong direction is not only not helpful, but in the Christian life it's dangerous. Hence the exhortation to run the race set before us.

Which of course brings up the question, "What is the race set before us?" and "What does it mean to run this race?" Well God is the one who sets the race before us. Our

text uses what is sometimes referred to as the divine passive, where the actor is not mentioned, but the context makes pretty clear that the actor is God. So, we are to run the race which God sets before us. We know the way then, of course, we know what this race is by looking to God's Word. David says in Psalm 119:32, **I will run in the way of your commandments.** Moses says in Deuteronomy 5, **You shall be careful therefore to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left** [Deuteronomy 5: 32]. And so we know the way that God has set before us, because we find it in Scripture. We know it by the precepts of Scripture, which say "Do this and live." We know by the prohibitions of scripture we say, "Don't do this", or "It's dangerous." We know about the promises of Scripture when God says, "If you do this, I will reward you," or by the practices in Scripture where we see God's people did this and context makes it clear whether we should or should not follow their example. We know it by the prayers of Scripture. When God's people pray for power to do this and God gave them that power. So we look to Scripture; we look to its precepts, its prohibitions, its promises, its practices and its prayers to understand what is the race that God has set before us.

Of course included in that is that we are not the first to run this race; we have this great cloud of witnesses. Now it's a little bit unclear just what they are witnessing. They could be witnessing us; they could be witnessing our race like people in the stands at an athletic competition. And that may be the most way to most natural way to read it. Or it could be that their lives witness to God's faithfulness; this great cloud of witnesses is not seeing us, but bearing witness to God and His faithfulness. Either way, it's clear that they have run the race before us. So, the example of the faithful who have gone before us is a big part of this race as Hebrews 11 has just shown us. When we look back at Hebrews 11, we're reminded that the race is the walk of faith. This race is about keeping our eyes on the promises. It means we walk by faith and not by sight. To not give up our confidence as the writer of Hebrews puts it again and again. And of course, as we will see, it means to keep our eyes on Jesus. The race is simply this: to live a life of obedience to God and continuing straight ahead by keeping our eyes on Jesus no matter what. We are headed for the prize, the Sabbath Rest, that heavenly inheritance, the city with foundations, the homeland, the better country. And so, we live in obedience to God with our eye on the prize.

The problem is often we want a shortcut. We want something easier than obedience. We want the prize right now and not in the future. So, we look for ways to have our good things now: shortcuts. How can I be comfortable now? How can I have pleasure now? How can I be known and loved now? How can I have paradise now? When we try to make this world into the world to come, we try to make heaven on Earth, we take our eyes off the prize, and we set our eyes on this age. But here are no shortcuts to paradise. There are no shortcuts in the life of faith. The truth is when we try to make this life into the life to come, we expect too much out of this age. So we distort the good of this age into something it's not, and we inevitably become

disappointed. When we try to make this life into the life to come, we get frustrated because it doesn't work. We get disappointed when our spouse isn't perfect, and our kids don't come pre-sanctified, and when our job isn't as fulfilling as we'd hoped. When our neighborhood isn't the paradise we want it to be, we get disappointed. We get frustrated with the present age because we're expecting it to be something it can never be. There are no shortcuts to paradise. There are no shortcuts in the life of faith. Don't get off the path, run straight.

Run the race, run the right race and run the whole race. When Paul says in first Corinthians 9:24 he says, **Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.** Now, I don't think Paul means that only one person will receive the Heavenly City, but his point is clear: not everyone who runs will receive it. There's no participation prize in the Christian life. You can't just start the race, you need to finish it. You need to persevere to the end. One Puritan writer says, "This phrase 'let us run the race' implies a holding out in our Christian course till it be finished. A man may run in a race and leave off before he come to the goal, but he that 'runs the race' holds out till they come to the end thereof." God did not send us 5000 miles to start the race, but to finish it. We may limp across the finish line, that's fine, but we must finish. The prize is only given at the end.

And so how do we do that right? How do we finish this race that is set before us? That brings us to the last point. So dress right, run straight, eyes up.

Now I might be considered a pessimist by some, because I think if your eyes are on your circumstances, you will almost always be discouraged. Looking around almost inevitably gets you down. We have things like Murphy's Law for a reason, right (you know Murphy's Law, "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.")? If our eyes are on our circumstances, what do we tend to see? We tend to see obstacles, difficulties, challenges. If you're in a race, what do you see? You see your rivals, you see the competition. We see our adversary, the Devil, the power of our indwelling sin, the world that makes giving up the path of least resistance. If we look around, we see a world that is at best ambivalent to Christianity, often antagonistic to it. We feel like we have to hide our faith, or else we'll be misunderstood or laughed out or cancelled. And this is in a supposedly Christian nation. We look around and we see temptation, the promises of pleasure and comfort, the "easy way." If only we would indulge here or compromise there, it would be so much easier. The world is like someone offering you a hamburger, a shower and a bed in the middle of a marathon. How do you say no to that?

Well, the writer tells us: looking to Jesus. Jesus, he says, is **the founder and perfecter of our faith.** Now, "faith" here likely means not my personal faith, but the faith, as in the teachings of Christianity or else our faith, but only in the sense that

faith is something that we share. Jesus is its founder because the work of Jesus is what gives content to our faith. This is something that we actually share with the Saints of old. Sometimes we think of this as a distinction, but it's not a distinction, it's something we have in common; something we share with people like Abraham and Moses and David. Abraham, who Jesus said saw His day and was glad, or Moses, who Jesus said wrote of me, or David, who according to Peter, foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ? Jesus is the founder of our faith because He is the content of it as He has always been. There would be nothing to believe it were if it were not for Jesus. There would be no promises, no hope, no gospel, no good news, nothing to look forward to, and no walk of faith in the expectation of better things, Jesus is the founder of our faith. He is also the perfecter of it. He not only secured the promises for us, He also walked in hope of them. He lived the life of faith, He came into this world, He trusted His father, He kept His eye on the prize and finally entered into it. He has already done. He lived the life for us. That doesn't mean we're not called to live it, it just means that we don't have to get it perfect because He already has. We will enter because He entered. We just need to keep our eyes on Him.

It also means if we want to know how to run the race, we look to Jesus. How did Jesus run the race? **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.** Notice three things in the way Jesus ran the race: there's the anticipation, the endurance, and the award. Now for time's sake, I'm going to talk about them all together, but our writer has already mentioned endurance. He said in verse 1, **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.** But I want to know where that endurance comes from. I mean, to call me to endure is one thing, but to tell me how to endure is another. Well, we see how in the person of Jesus. What motivated Jesus to endure the Cross? **The joy that was set before him.** Anticipation of joy can get us through a lot, can it? I mean, this is how athletes train practicing a kind of discipline that most of us cannot comprehend. This is how musicians rehearse for hours on end. This is how great scientists make discoveries, and so keep held up in labs, day after day. The joy of the Super Bowl ring or the joy of the Perfect Sonata, or the joy of the discovery, the vaccine, the cure. There's always something in the future moving people toward that future, motivating them to endure. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the Cross. If you want the prize, Paul says Philippians 3:14, **press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.** If you want the prize of seeing God face to face of dwelling in His presence for eternity, of life in the new creation, a world without sin and shame and sadness, keep your eyes on Jesus. He's the one who has purchased that for us as a gift. He is the one who has already entered in. He rose from the dead and was seated at the Father's right hand. He is where the psalmist says, **are pleasures forevermore** [Psalm 16:11].

So you can despise the shame. That means you don't count whatever shame you might endure, whatever hardship, whatever difficulty, whatever rejection you might endure, you don't see it as worth anything, at least not in comparison to the glory that will be revealed. A moment of suffering with Christ for an eternity of glory with Him. For the joy set before you, take up your cross, follow Jesus, despise the shame, and know that on the last day you will be seated with Him. You will have the favor of the Father, authority with Christ, and pleasures forevermore. And you can't do this in your own strength of course, sometimes we think, "I just need to see the prize and then I can kind of work myself up into a frenzy of joy and anticipation, and in so doing I can motivate myself toward Heaven." It won't work. You can't do it. But God gives us His Spirit to that end. So look to the Spirit. Rely on the Spirit to grant you joy, to give you a clear vision of that joy, and to motivate you to run the race for the joy set before you. And so dress right, run straight, eyes up, trusting in the Spirit to pull us through.

Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that you would give us a clear vision of the hope that we have, of the joy that is set before us, where Jesus is seated at your right hand. Help us to see Him and all His glory. Help us to know that there are pleasures at your right hand forever. Help us to be motivated with that sight in mind. Father, we pray that you would do this by the work of your Spirit in our hearts. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.