

---

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. <sup>2</sup>Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. <sup>3</sup>Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.*

The captain stands in the locker room getting the team ready to compete. He knows it's not going to be easy. There will be ups and downs throughout the game. There will be thoughts of giving up and throwing in the towel along the way. But he knows that the struggle of the team means something. Win, lose, or draw, his team is going to compete to the last whistle. What a pep talk!

Today we hear a pep talk of sorts from the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. He's telling them many of the same things the captain says in the locker room. He says that they are going to have to lean on their teammates. He says that they better know that the other team is not just going to lay down and die. And he implores them to keep their focus on the game plan.

This section of scripture that we have before us takes place right after the heroes of faith section, where the writer takes a closer look at so many throughout the Old Testament who lived by faith. We've got all these great examples. The first verse in chapter twelve does not change the topic regarding the heroes of faith but connects their faith to ours. He writes, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." And we can read the list of witnesses in chapter eleven. Here we find familiar names like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. But there are some names that are less familiar too, like Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah. There were still other faithful believers, too many to mention. As we hear, they lived their faith, but it was not easy. They endured mocking, beatings, imprisonment, and even death. The writer says, "The world was not worthy of them as they wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground." We look at these people so fondly because they ran the race to completion. They set before us an example, a witness, of faith.

But the list goes on. The last verse of chapter eleven says this: "All of these were commended in Scripture by faith, yet they did not receive what was promised, because God had planned something better for us, namely, that they would not reach the goal apart from us." This list of believers is incomplete, not just because there are many more in the Old Testament not listed, but because there are heroes of faith in the New Testament time too. You know some of those heroes of faith from the pages of the New Testament. You see the Apostles, who carried the gospel all around the world, facing mistreatment and execution for living the faith. You see the individual Christians whose stories don't take up much ink but have lasting impacts on God's Church. And you know some of these heroes of faith because you have watched them live out their faith with your own eyes. Just like the heroes of old, they endured the pain and misery of the world as they kept on running the race. What did all of these people have in common? They reached the finish line. They won the prize of eternity.

So, if they've reached where we want to be, it makes sense that the writer tells us to use their witness as fuel. But understand that this does not mean they are with us. There is no indication from the Bible that the dead are accompanying us through this life. And what kind of paradise would it be if grandma and grandpa had to watch our sinful lives? Yet, the book of Revelation talks about the saints in heaven crying out to the Lord about when he will rid the world of sin and rescue the believers still living here. They do not watch us, but they do

pray for us. They cheer us on from the finish line. But the writer to the Hebrews here is talking about their witness. We are motivated by their example. We are spurred on by their faith.

And what are we to do with that example? The writer tells us, “let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us.” The race is on. We are the competitors fighting for the gold. And I want to really focus in on a couple of these phrases here.

We hear about “patient endurance.” I get to visit our shut-ins about once a month. In general, our shut-ins are on the back nine of life. They feel weaker than they once did. Their days consist of fewer activities than they did when they were in their prime. But their zeal for God’s word is just as strong as ever. They know that the finish line is right around the corner. They can smell the food vendors grilling up the brats and burgers waiting to help the runners replenish what’s been taken out of them by the race. And maybe you feel the same way as these shut-ins. Maybe you find the main thrust of your prayer life asking that the Lord come to take you home sooner than later. But not all are so blessed. We don’t know our days and hours, but as a teenager or a twenty-something year old, your race looks really long. Patiently endure. It is so easy to take your mind off the finish line when it looks so far away.

We also hear about the “race laid out for us.” All of our lives are different. Because of that all of our struggles are different. But this does not mean we get to choose what we go through. Life is not like a buffet where you get to choose what you want and pass on what you don’t. In fact, something that you learn with experience is that while some struggles we face are preventable by us, most are not. This race – along with its pains and trials – has been laid out by God. And all of this is done with the purpose of getting you to the finish line.

Then the writer gives a warning: “let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us.” How do we prepare to run the race? Simple. We drop anything that could weigh us down. And we know that we carry a lot of weight when it comes to sin. One thing we all have in common: temptation does not stop. Our temptations might look different. There might be some sins that grab ahold of you more than they grab me, and vice versa. These are the tree roots that would trip us up along the path. These are the distractions that aim to break our focus on our goal. These are all the alternative paths that look to have better destinations. These are those who tell us to give up, to lose our persistence. These are the injuries that nag us along the way, whether medical, emotional, or relational. But if we want to make it to the finish line, we have to get rid of these anchors. We have to stop living like our existence is a sprint of 80 or 90 years and start treating it like the long path to eternity that it is.

But then comes the bombshell. We won’t make it to the finish line on our own. We can be inspired by the great cloud of witnesses who came before. We can be ready to pace ourselves in the race. We can make every effort to remove the burdens of sin from our lives. But it won’t be enough. The requirement to enter heaven is perfection. That’s not me. That’s not you. Sin does ensnare us. It binds our legs together and drags us to the ground. It holds us back from our goal and leads us to loathe ourselves and our inability to stop sinning for just an hour. Because as soon as we think we’ve mastered sin, that one selfish thought pops up in our minds, or that one mean-spirited word comes out of our mouths.

But the writer to the Hebrews is not tempting us with something out of reach. In fact, he tells us the most important piece of information to the run the race successfully that we so easily forget: “Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God’s throne.” Where do we find our power to keep going? We don’t find it in ourselves. The work-righteous self-help-ism of

the world will not get you to the finish line. It will lead you off the path into the wilderness of self-loathing and ultimately, hell.

Instead, our power is found in Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. More than the examples of those heroes of faith that come before us, Jesus sets the ultimate example of the race run to perfection. He is what our faith focuses on. He is our Lord. And even more than that, he suffered the cross for our misdeeds and sits on God's throne. God's requirement for heaven is perfection, and Jesus lived perfectly so that we could share in the reward.

So, keep going! Keep running the race. But be aware of the dangers. Some will come from outside of you. Your life will not be easy. The forces of Satan at work in the world will try and keep you from that goal. But there are dangers inside of you too, all the way down to your very nature. That Old Adam keeps kicking. It is always willing to sacrifice eternity on the altar of here and now. Watch that you don't let sin strangle you. Take sin to God in repentance, trusting in Jesus, that sin is forgiven and gone. And pray that he would help you struggle against it, that it would no longer be a stumbling block on your path to eternity.

And keep focused on Christ. When we focus on ourselves, we worship what is flawed and will fail us. But Jesus has not and will not let us down. Finally, know what's at the finish line. There you will receive joy beyond anything you've experienced in the world.

As you leave here to get back on the fields and courts and tracks of life, take to heart the writer's pep talk. Now, let's grab ahold of what Christ won for us! Amen.