



SESSION OBJECTIVE: HEBREWS 12:1-3

To better understand what running the race like Christ looks like.

Read the Text:

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, 2 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. (Heb. 12:1–3, ESV)

Study the Text:

Pace Yourself

In light of the “roll call of the faithful” listed throughout Hebrews 11, the author now calls us to action: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Heb. 12:1). Verses 1 through 3 unfold precisely how we are to run this race. Below is a breakdown of the key terms and concepts in this passage.

A GREAT CLOUD

The first interpretive decision involves figuring out who the “great cloud of witnesses” are. Some have suggested these are dead Christians, perhaps even ones who are especially meaningful to us. The key interpretive detail, however, is the first word in Hebrews 12:1: “Therefore.” In other words, in light of everything that has already been said, we are to do what Hebrews 12 says to do. What has just been said in the previous chapter? That many people throughout the centuries have exhibited faith in God and are *therefore* exemplars of faith. The cloud of witnesses is “all these” who were “commended through their faith” (Heb. 11:39).

The term “witnesses” itself is also likely to be understood with a dual meaning. The underlying Greek word for “witnesses” is *μάρτυς* (martyrs), the word from which we get our English word “martyr.” The term can be

understood in two different ways. It can mean someone who “testifies” to something. Think: “a witness in a courtroom.” This understanding makes the most sense given who it is referencing. Those in Hebrews 11 can testify to God's faithfulness and are therefore great examples to motivate us in our own race. However, the term can also mean something like “an observer,” and this is likely also in mind. Hebrews 12:1–3, as we are about to see, uses imagery from the ancient games, and in this illustration, they watch us run the Christian race, cheering us on from the stands. So while we are to watch their example, they are also watching us, cheering us on. The participle in verse 1 isn't as clear in the ESV translation, but it could be translated: “Therefore, let us run the race set before us with endurance, having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.” In other words, we are further enabled to run the race because of this great cloud of witnesses.

LAY IT ASIDE

To take the race imagery even further, the author says: “Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely” (Heb. 12:1b). Again, there is another participle, indicating yet another thing that enables us to better run the race with endurance: “Therefore, let us run the race set before us with endurance, having so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, laying aside every weight and the sin that entangles us.” How are we to run the race with endurance? By having a great cloud of witnesses and laying aside every encumbrance. The idea of laying aside that which “clings so closely” conveys the imagery of a runner in the ancient games. The runners would come out onto the field in a multi-colored tunic, sandals, and a wreath on their heads. But before the race, they would take off the wreath, the sandals, and the tunic, and be nearly naked while they actually ran. Why? Because all of that extra stuff would weigh them down! They had one small piece of fabric that covered them, and that's it. The author uses that imagery and says, “Do this with regard to your sin! Take every potential spiritual dead weight and get rid of it, so you can run the race better!”

LOOK TO JESUS

The final participle comes in verse 2: “...looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.” The author suggests that we can run the Christian race with endurance by having a great cloud of witnesses as an example, laying aside our sin and dead weight, and looking to Jesus Christ. In the imagery of the ancient games, Jesus Christ is both the starting line and finish line. He not only is the “founder” of our faith, in that he is the beginning of it, but he is also the perfecter of it, in that he has brought it to full completion. He is, in the language of Revelation, “the Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8), “the first and the last” (Rev. 1:17), and “the beginning and the end” (Rev. 21:6; c.f. Rev. 22:13). The proverbial race of the Christian faith begins with Jesus Christ and ends with Jesus Christ. In other words, throughout our Christian lives, we keep our eyes on him and his example. And what is his example? The author includes: “enduring the cross,” “despising the shame,” and “sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). He has endured everything we could possibly experience and therefore is the example *par excellence*.

Beyond that, verse 3 includes one additional qualifier: “so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” In other words, Jesus is not only the example we are to look to, having endured suffering, but by looking at him, we are given further strength and endurance for the race. Notice, we are not told to look at Jesus's sufferings. We are told to look at Jesus himself. Jesus's actions do not motivate us and give us strength; rather, the living Lord who still reigns at “the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2) does. Jesus is not merely a historical figure who left us a good example. He is presently Lord and King, and he still ministers to his people because he is indeed alive.

What About Now?

The main takeaway is simple, but not easy: run the race with endurance. It's easy to become fatigued when things in your life become especially difficult. Another takeaway is the importance of going to war against your sin. It will weigh you down. It will encumber you. It will prevent you from running well. So do what you must to put it away. And finally, and most importantly: keep your eyes focused on Jesus. Many distractions will try to steal your joy, so it is important to do what Helen H. Lemmel said in her hymn, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, In the light of His glory and grace.”¹

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Hebrews 12:1a. What does the word “therefore” refer back to? Who are the “great cloud of witnesses?”

2. What kind of imagery does the author have in mind throughout this passage? How do the “cloud of witnesses” fit within the imagery?

Day Two

1. Read Hebrews 12:1b. What does it mean to “lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely? Again, how does this fit within the imagery the author is using?

2. Read Hebrews 12:1c. What are we to do? How does this fit within the imagery the author is using?

Day Three

1. Read Hebrews 12:2a. How is Jesus described in this text? What does that mean?

2. Read Hebrews 12:2b. What reasons does this verse give for us to “look to Jesus?”

¹ Helen H. Lemmel, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* (1922)

Day Four

1. Read Hebrews 12:3. Who are we to pay attention to?

2. What does focusing on Jesus do for us as we run the race with endurance?

Discuss the Text!

Session 30 Discussion: Endure

The main thrust of this passage is found in verse 1: “Let us run the race set before us with endurance.” We are to endure, or persevere. Talk as a group about how difficult it can be to endure in certain seasons of your life, and what has allowed you to run the race with endurance.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever run a long-distance race? How difficult was it? How important was your clothing? What did you think about?
2. What is one “weight” in your life that may not be sinful in itself but is making it harder for you to run the Christian race well?
3. When you become spiritually weary, where are you most tempted to look for strength other than Christ?
4. Hebrews 12 points us both to the faithful who came before us and ultimately to Jesus. Who is someone whose faithfulness has helped you endure, and what specifically did you learn from them?
5. What is one area of your life right now where you are tempted to slow down, quit, or “grow weary and faint-hearted”? How would fixing your eyes on Christ change the way you approach it?
6. Kid Talk: Invite your kid to go on a walk, but have them put on a backpack full of something heavy (a small weight, books, rocks, etc.). Explain to them on the walk that the Christian life is like a race, and that sin is like that backpack that weighs them down. Ask them: “What things are weighing you down that you need to get rid of so you can follow Jesus more freely?”

Takeaways:

1. The Christian life is like a race that we are to run with endurance.
2. Running with endurance is made easier when we consider those who have gone before us by faith, strip our lives of sin, and focus on Jesus Christ, our final destination.