

The Race Set before Us, Set Before Him

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[0 : 00] Seeking the Lord's blessing, let's turn again to the portion of Scripture that we read. Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

But I want us to look at this portion, particularly under two headings, as you have them in these verses. There is something that is set before us.

It's a race. A race, or the race, that is set before us. And secondly, there was something that was set before him, before Jesus.

And that is, who for the joy that was set before him. What is set before us, what is set before him.

[1 : 34] This epistle to the Hebrews was written, just as it says, to Jewish Christians.

But it was written to them for a particular purpose. And that particular purpose was this, that they wouldn't go back to the customs and the rituals and the sacrifices of the Jewish system.

That they wouldn't fall back into seeing the old system. And that they wouldn't fall back, as it were, from seeing the wonder that God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to be the saviour of sinners, to be the once only sacrifice for sin.

That God had set before them, through the example of others, a way to live the Christian life.

A way to live the Christian life. Some of the narratives suggest to us that some had gone back. But there were many there who were struggling with this concept.

[2 : 59] And you've got to take your mind back almost to this time when there was so much persecution. And so many dangers on every side.

And God, in his mercy, in his overtures of love and grace, writes this letter to them. And the whole thrust and theme of the letter is, Christ is far better.

Christ is far better. And of course, that's a theme that should resonate in the heart of every Christian. Christ is far better.

Christ is far better. Christ is far better. Christ is far better. There may have been those, of course, in those congregations and in those gatherings who were perhaps not quite believers or perhaps they were sitting on the fence.

Perhaps they were following from afar, hadn't really made a commitment and won't make a commitment. and perhaps there was others among them who were not saved.

[4 : 17] So perhaps that congregation or those gatherings of these Jews really reflect in many senses a congregation in 2016.

And it may reflect in many senses this congregation. Many of you are Christians. You believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. You've been saved by the grace of God.

Others have heard the gospel for years and you seem to be sitting on the fence following from afar not making that commitment and taking that step.

There may be others of you and God forbid who continue to reject Christ. and the older you get the more that rejection seems to embed itself in your heart and in your lives.

And my plea to you is not to be hardened but to come and to confess your sin and to come to Christ we sang these these great words thy wondrous loving kindness show thou that by thy right hand saves them that trust in thee.

[5 : 46] God saves that's what he does that's what Christ came to do to save to save to save sinners.

What is set before us then? what is set before us? A race there is a race set before us the word for race is the word that's used for agony the word race is agon from which we get the word agony and the word means a fight it means a conflict it's similar to the word that's used in Luke's gospel when Christ himself says strive to enter in at the narrow gate the word strive means to agonise agonise to enter in at the straight gate so immediately we see something about this race it's an endurance race it's a race in which there is a requirement for us to engage fully this is not a hundred meters not a hundred meters that you run and then you flop on the ground and say well that's it

I've done it it's not that at all this is a marathon race it's an endurance race and if you're a Christian please make sure that your lives aren't just a series of hundred meters a series of hundred meters where you you run for a hire and you stop and you take a break and you go back to the world for a while and then you you worry about it and then you come back and you say well I better run again and you do another hundred meters and then you take a break and you do your own thing and then well I better get back to God and you go back and you do it's not that the Christian life is not that this life takes discipline hard training self sacrifice self sacrifice it requires all of your effort it requires you to press on as

Paul says when he's writing to the Philippians it requires you to be as Paul in writing to Timothy and there are many texts which you could use to speak about this race and the very nature of this race Paul in writing to Timothy says this to Timothy 2nd Timothy chapter 2 and verse 2 and he says this you therefore my son verse 1 be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus and the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also you therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ this race is an endurance race it requires discipline and training it requires me to be a soldier a soldier and being a soldier as you know requires much training and much discipline it takes time to train yourself as it were to be a full blown soldier

I know that these kinds of examples and images perhaps fall down slightly in certain things but nevertheless the Bible uses this word soldier no army general or colonel would ever think about putting a new recruit to the front of the battle they would never do that it requires training hard training Paul writing in the same theme to Timothy later on in chapter 4 chapter 4 and verse 7 he says this as he's nearing the end of his own life he says to Timothy I have fought the good fight I have finished the race I have kept the faith the faith this race requires me it requires all my effort it requires me to be a soul it requires me to fight the good fight of faith to end

[11 : 14] Jude what am I fighting against I'm fighting against the world and the flesh and the devil I'm fighting against the sin that is in me the spirit wars against the flesh but the flesh sure does war against the spirit if you're a Christian you will put your amen to that the flesh wars against the spirit we were singing that as the apple of the eye me keep and I will shade me crows from nude oppressors compassing me round as deadly foes we don't have those oppressors from the outside but we have them on the inside in the inside oh they can be on the outside too in its own way in our day and generation sin can manifest itself in many ways we spoke this morning about the grave danger of losing sight of the awe and the majesty and the transcendence of god to lose the fear of god and the example we used was was malachi chapter one where the lack of fear and the lack of honour manifested itself in the worship they were bringing to god just what they wanted to bring as if it didn't really matter they were worshipping anyway were they not well we come to worshipping anyway surely you'll accept from us just what we bring and god says no god demands the best he gives us the best and he demands the best and we heard a great sermon as

I'm sure you did yourselves on thanksgiving bet to heed sometimes quite difficult to say no to sin and no to temptation.

But we must. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians, says to the Ephesians in chapter 6, having done all to stand.

Stand therefore. Having done all. The risk that is set before us.

And God gives us encouragements for this race. He gives us encouragements for this race. What encouragement is God giving us?

[15 : 32] He's giving us this encouragement. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

What is Paul doing in seeking to encourage us in terms of the race, running the race with endurance, the race that is set before us, the rules that are set out before us, God's plan and God's way.

when he takes us back to Hebrews 11. And he tells us how to win the race. How do you win this race?

Well, the answer to that is by faith. By faith. It is by faith that we win the race.

The faith that is from God. The faith with which God is pleased. And God says about these people in Hebrews 11, and all these having obtained a good testimony.

[16 : 54] A good testimony. testimony. And we read these words too in Hebrews 11, and verse 2. Let's read from the beginning.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, for by it the elders obtained a good testimony. They obtained a good testimony.

Enoch was taken away so he did not see death, and was not found because God had taken him. For before he was taken he had this testimony that he pleased God.

The exercise of his faith pleased God. Pleased God. God is pleased with us when we exercise faith.

Faith in him. Faith in his word. Faith in his all his statutes and his commandments.

[18 : 03] And he takes us back to these witnesses. Look at what they suffered. Abel he suffered hatred from his brother. Noah mockery and scorn.

Look at Abraham how his faith was tested. He was given a promise that he would be a nation. But there was no son. And he had to wait and wait and wait but still no son.

And God gave him a son in God's time. And what did God ask him to do with that son? Take thy son thine only son.

Take him up to the mountain and offer your son as a sacrifice. And what did Abraham do? He faltered not at the promise of God.

He believed God. And there's a remarkable text in the middle of that remarkable passage in Romans chapter four.

[19 : 17] He believed to the glory of God. In other words, faith and the exercise about faith in living the Christian life, in running the race.

That's what gives glory to God. How can I give glory to God? You may have asked the question, how can I, a poor wretched sinner, give glory to God?

I'll tell you how. believe on him. Exercise faith. There's nothing very complicated or complex about it.

Live your life. Live your life. Honour him. Honour others. Do your duty. Go to your work. Do your duty to your employer. Bless the day to strangers.

Worship God. Raise your family. Love your husband. Love your wife. Love your family. And present yourself at the means of grace as often as you possibly can.

[20 : 31] Because they are just that, means of grace. A way for God to give you more grace. To help you go a little bit further on the way.

A little bit further every time. And these witnesses, and these witnesses, it's almost as if the witnesses are speaking, and the witnesses are saying, the life of faith is the life that wins.

We run it. We run this race right through the lion's den, and right through the swords, and right through the wars, and right through the persecution, and right through crisis after crisis.

And it's the life of faith that wins. And that's the life that God will honour, and that God does honour here.

There's one of these great golden principles of the Bible, and of the Christian life, that he who honours God, God will honour him.

[21 : 49] It's our golden principle. There are many. This is just one. And these run the race, and they witnessed the victory.

Oh, sometimes it's not easy to run the race. Sometimes we go through trials and temptations, and sometimes we're overtaken by sins. We feel as if the enemy has just completely swamped our lives.

We feel as if we're just useless. We feel like we're failing the Christian life. We feel like we're failing God.

We feel like we're failing the church. We feel like we're failing out families. Doubts then creep in, and Satan is ready to pound, because he knows all our weak spots.

And suddenly you're not so sure of yourself, perhaps as you once were. as you once were.

[23 : 07] And God says to us, look at these people, look at what they suffered, look at their testimony, look at the testimony of others, look at what James and the epistle of James is saying, you.

James is saying, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience, but let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Blessed is the man, James says, who endures temptation, for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he himself tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed and so on.

and he's encouraging them to run the race, encouraging them to run the race, looking at those who will testify that faith is worth it and we can draw inspiration from these people.

[24 : 45] They can't strengthen us, but they can inspire us. do you know that's one of the great things in the Christian life, that when we gather together like we gather together here, there is a great inspiration from the people of God gathering together.

There's a great inspiration from seeing people. We might not see them from one Sunday to another, but when you see them, it inspires you, it encourages you.

And it's one of the great things about the prayer meeting, often neglected for various reasons. One of the aspects that is often just pushed to one side is the fact that there is a fantastic strengthening of each other when the Lord's people gather together in the prayer meeting.

Oh, don't forsake the prayer meeting whatever you do. whatever you do. And in writing to the Hebrew Christians, the writer is saying, look at the cloud of witnesses.

And he's saying also into verse 13, into chapter 13, he says something of the same in verse 7. Remember those who rule over you, are your leaders, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

[26 : 15] what is the outcome of their conduct? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

that, if you're using the AV, remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God, who is faithful, considering the end of that conversation, the end of their conduct, that way of life.

life. This is them running the race. And how are they running it? They're running it looking unto Jesus.

Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and he's saying to them, imitate their faith. Be like these people.

Be like these people. let us run within Jews the race that is set before us, and he's given them as an encouragement the crowd of witnesses, and he's saying to them directly, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

[27 : 30] Jesus, the author and finisher, the captain of our salvation. He uses the same term in chapter 2. Jesus, the author, it was through him that faith started, and it is through him that faith will endure, and he will bring it to perfection.

He's the author and finisher or perfecter of our faith. And remember the picture that he paints in Hebrews chapter 2.

When he's talking about the captain of our salvation, our salvation, before he says that, he says, in leading sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect.

And I'll come on to that. And the picture you have in Hebrews 2 is a procession. This race, this endurance race, the encouragements from the witnesses who have been there and done that, endured and won faith by faith.

And he saved us not only that, but Jesus. Jesus, and it's a procession. Jesus is at the very front of this procession. And we have to join this procession, join this great, this great procession, this great movement of people moving us through this world world and into the next world.

[29 : 08] And he's at the head and he's leading them as their captain. Oh, what a marvelous, beautiful picture. And where is he taking us? He's taking us to glory, to glory.

glory. And he's the leader, and he's the one who's doing and who has done something that nobody else could do.

That's what the word means in Hebrews chapter two, the captain of our salvation, perfect through something, the pioneer, the one who did, someone who did something that nobody else could do.

And in doing that, he takes his people with him. And what did he do? What did he do? Well, perhaps I'll come out to that later without losing the train of thought.

And he says to them, Jesus, looking into Jesus, the heroes of the faith, that was the end of their, that was all that they were doing, looking into Jesus.

[30 : 38] And he says to them, that they were saved by the promise yet to come. We are saved because of the promise that has come.

And we're both united, them and us, alike, redeemed by Christ, the perfecter of their faith, the author and perfecter of their faith, the author and perfecter of our faith.

faith. How are we to run this race? Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us.

Or as you have it perhaps in the Bibles you have in front of you, I just happened to pick this one up because it was the first one here by the way. Looking unto Jesus, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us.

And perhaps this, the word beset literally means to ensnare us, to capture us, to bring us into captivity, which is what sin does of course.

[31 : 59] Laying aside heavy weight and the sin, what are the weights? Well, they are things that make us heavy so that we can't run this marathon race.

We need to run light, to run light. You know yourselves, the picture here, I'm sure you've heard it loads of times. You see runners in a race and their lightest possible clothing, their latest fabric technology energy, anything to give them an edge.

They're not weighed down by heavy clothing. They are running as light as possible. And their bodies too are fit. They've been training.

They've been training for an endurance reason. No excess weight. There was a story about a famous Russian sprinter.

Some of you may remember. his name Valerie Bortz, if I remember him. Quite famous. He won the 100 metres. He was the Russian Olympic champion.

[33 : 09] And then after he won the Olympics, he went to the US to run in some races. And he didn't win any of the races. And everybody was amazed.

The great Valerie Bortz, how could he not win these races? races? So they asked him, what's gone wrong with you? Why haven't you run? Why haven't you won these races?

And do you know what Valerie Bortz have said? It's because I was three pounds overweight. Three pounds overweight.

He didn't lay aside the weight. we must strip away anything that holds us back.

The question is, what is holding us back? What's weighing us down? Is it materialism? Is it worldliness?

[34 : 12] Is it bitterness and anger? Have you got a chip on your shoulder that's going back 20, 30, 40 years? Is it something that happened in the past that you just won't forgive somebody for?

Even though that person may be long gone for all I know. It doesn't have to be something physical on the outside. It can be something in your head and in your heart.

of course that might weigh you down that are not sinful. That should be said. There are things that we do that aren't necessarily sinful in and of themselves. The question is are they helping us any? Are they helping us to run the race? Are they helping us to run light? In writing to the Galatians, Paul writes to them and says to them, oh foolish Galatians, why were they foolish? He says to them, well having started off in the spirit, having started off fully accepting the preaching of the gospel and Christ, Christ and the cross of Christ, they had drifted back to Christ plus something else. I need more than Christ.

I need to do this and I need to do that. Things that they thought would add to their own spirituality and to their own favor with God as if they could win points from God.

And he says to them, you foolish Galatians, having been started off in the spirit, are you now going to be made perfect by the law?

[36 : 42] They had fallen back into a legalism, a legalism. So there are the weights and there's the sin and he uses sin singular.

What sin is he talking about? Well it could mean a body of sin. Lots of sins together into one body of sin. But many of the commentators believe that it is the sin of unbelief.

The sin of unbelief. The sin of not really taking God at his word. Not really believing but doubting. Doubting.

The sin of unbelief. The sin of unbelief. The sin of unbelief. The sin of not having the shield of faith. To quench the fiery darts of the wicked.

Accepting what other people say and not what God says. And believing the devil and not saying to him that you're a liar, Satan, you're a liar.

[37 : 54] The sin of unbelief. Our Lord himself was tempted as you know. He was tempted by Satan. And every time he was tempted, how did he respond?

It is written. God has said. God has said. God has said. But he tells us to lay aside every weight of the sin which so easily ensnares us.

Sin is so subtle. It's so. It creeps in. Almost without us knowing it. It creeps in. And before you know it, it's got you.

And we have to be on a guard. Always on a guard. Always running. Always watching. Always looking. And to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

And of course that takes us on then to what was set before him. Who, for the joy that was set before him.

[39 : 05] He's saying to them, he is your example. He is your example. He himself ran a race. He was in a race.

How did he win the race? By faith. By faith. And he made aside all weights and obstructions.

Even though he was one who was bearing our sin. Bearing our sin in his own body to the tree. He believed. He lived a life of faith.

Of faith. What was the joy that was set before him. When only all you can see is a cross and shame.

That doesn't look like joy to me. That doesn't look like joy to me. Well, the reality is that the joy was the joy of knowing.

[40 : 10] That in living a life of faith. And he is the greatest example of faith that ever lived. He knew. He knew.

That in living that life of faith. And in suffering. And dying. As a result of bearing our sins.

That he was going to lead his people to glory. In this great procession. That even though he descended into the darkness.

Of hell. And endured. Everything that our sin deserved. Everything that our sin deserved. The fact that he endured.

Before he died physically. He endured. Spiritual death. And remember that Adam died. Spiritually. Before he died physically.

[41 : 10] And of course he didn't die eternally. Because we believe he was saved. God covered him. God provided a sacrifice. But he died spiritually first. And the second Adam.

Had to die spiritually first. And how did he die spiritually? By descending into hell. And suffering the punishment that was due to us.

An infinite punishment. All in three hours. How could it be? Well only because of who he was. An infinite person.

An infinite person. But what suffering. And what cost. And what love. And what faith.

What was the great cry of dereliction? My God. My God. Why have you forsaken me? What was it? But a cry of faith. Of faith. Faith.

[42 : 09] From the depths of hell. He was a stranger there. He was a stranger there. He didn't belong there. He was only there.

Because he was bading you. Sin and mine. He was only there. So that you won't have to suffer it. And he wants you to come with him.

He said to you. Join this procession. I've been down there. And I am now victorious. Come with me to heaven.

Come with me to glory. The greatest act of faith. Ever. Ever. And having done it all.

He sat down. At the right hand of the throne of God. Enduring and despising. And we must look to.

[43 : 04] Jesus the victorious. Pioneer and perfecter. And of course in looking into Jesus. He says to us.

And the word means this. That you look away. From rival attractions. Looking into Jesus. Inherent in the word.

Is looking away. From rival. Attractions. Let us lay aside every weight.

Of the sin. Which so easily ensnares us. And let us run with endurance. The race. That is set before us. Because. Of the.

Race. Of the joy. That was set before him. Consider him. Lest you become weary. And discouraged.

[44 : 01] In your souls. And he says a remarkable thing to them. You have not yet resisted. To bloodshed. Striving against sin. We haven't.

Oh there may be scars. And marks on the way. There was a great poem. And I can't remember it all. A poem which went.

Or asked the question. Have you no scars? Have you no scars? Have you no scars? Oh there are scars along the way.

But my. Christian friend. Be encouraged. Don't be weary. Don't be weary. Don't give up. Keep on keeping on.

Let's go another. It might feel like a few millimeters. You might feel as if you're not making any progress at all. But keep on.

[45 : 03] Even if it is millimeter by millimeter. It's still progress. Inch by inch. And let's go on together. Together. Loving the Lord.

Looking to him. Realizing that glory awaits. And victory awaits. Amen.