

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Fix Your Eyes on Jesus

When I was a child, I wanted to play baseball. But I was never very good either at hitting or catching the ball. I remember different coaches telling me over and over again throughout my childhood, “Keep your eye on the ball.” I never had a clue what that meant. So when I became a parent and I was trying to teach my children to hit and catch a ball, I told them, “You should see the bat hit the ball. You should see the ball land in your glove.” Hopefully, I have at last figured out what those coaches were trying to tell me and I hope that it helped my kids. In fact, if you asked them, they would probably tell you that I took that lesson in a lot of other directions. When I was teaching them to ride their bikes, I would tell them, “Look where you want the bike to go. It will go there.” When they were learning to drive, I told them, “Look where you want the car to go. It will go there. And don’t spend a lot of time looking in other directions, because it will go there, too.”

Today’s epistle lesson talks about looking where we want to go. Now, the author wasn’t thinking of a bike or a car or hitting or catching a ball. He was thinking of running a race. And the image works there, too, I think. If a child is running a race and he or she looks down at the ground, they’re not going to run as efficiently they would if they looked toward the goal. But what about when you can’t see the goal? I ran lots of distance races when I was in college and the seminary, and you can’t always see the finish line on a distance race. But you can often see people who are leading you. They can show you how best to get where you’re going. Today, we’re not talking about running marathons or 10 K’s. We’re talking about running the race of life. And our leader is Jesus. My friends, **Fix your eyes on Jesus.**

I.

He was focused on joy. Now, what does that have to do with running a race? Unfortunately, our NIV translation doesn’t bring it out very well, but in this reading, God uses the same basic vocabulary for us and for Jesus. Jesus had a course laid out for him and he endured it, just as God calls us to run the course that’s laid out for us. The book of Hebrews says, “**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him**” that’s where the Greek talks about the course marked out for him – “**endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**” Jesus ran his race for joy – the joy of winning. That’s what makes it worthwhile, right? You think about all the hours athletes put in to prepare for a race and it all comes down to that moment when the race is run. What a waste if the person just gives up and stops running. Even if you don’t win, getting a personal best is exciting and makes the work seem worthwhile.

Jesus wasn’t running a race where you can be happy with a personal best. His course ran from Bethlehem to the cross and beyond. What was the joy? Conquering death and sin and hell for us. That’s really what it comes down to. Jesus was going to experience the joy of his Father’s praise and the songs of the angels and the church in heaven. But the heart of his joy is winning life for us because he loves us and he knows we could never do that. Why not? Well, you hear me say over and over again, yet it always remains true. Because we are sinners, through and through. That’s the way we’re born and that’s the way we would die left to ourselves. We could only get to hell. So Jesus ran his race in our place.

Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. What does that mean? The author means that our faith comes from him. All our love for the cross, all our trust in what Jesus did there for us, all our joy in joining him in heaven is something that Jesus gives us. He is the author of our faith. We don’t decide to believe or to be good. That would be like thistles in your garden producing tomatoes or cucumbers. It just doesn’t happen. The way we were born, we only produced sin. We only rebelled against God. And that part of us is still in our hearts dragging us back toward sin every single day. But Jesus gave us faith. He came to us in the message of the cross and he made us new.

He will perfect that faith. Day in and day out, his blood covers all that's wrong with it. Every time we complain about the hurts and sorrows of our lives and criticize how God is caring for us, every time we're afraid and we fail to cling to him, every time we stumble and we sin, Jesus' blood covers our imperfect faith and God sees it as perfect. Every time we hear that good news, Jesus works to make our faith clearer and stronger and better. Jesus works to make that faith a powerful influence on our lives, day after day. He makes it grow here. When the time comes, we will shed the flesh we now have and with it all our sin, and we will live in heaven with Jesus where we will have a perfect joy and trust in our God for all eternity.

How did Jesus do all that? He endured the cross, scorning its shame. Sometimes we have to endure pain here. Think about medical procedures. Thankfully, we have anesthesia for most of them, but you can't always have it. Even if you do, there is often terrible pain afterwards. If you have a knee replacement, if you have cancer surgery or chemotherapy, if you have to take drugs that cause side effects, you have to endure the pain hoping for a better outcome. Jesus endured the most horrible pain of all time. He endured the cross. There on that cross, God the Father poured all our sin and all our punishment out on him. All that the sinner inside us deserves, all the death and hell and pain that goes with every sin we give in to here, God the Father poured on Jesus. The Bible emphasizes the shame even more than the pain of all that, because dying and going to hell are not good deaths. They are horrible, shameful events that brand us as rebels against God. But Jesus stepped up and he took it in our place. He didn't care that he was going to be shamed. He shrugged off the mockery of his enemies and the jeers of the devil. He embraced our punishment so that we will live. And then he rose to tell us once and for all that he did it. We have won.

That was the course Jesus had to run. He ran every step of it. Now he is seated in heaven, in the victor's seat, enjoying all the praise of his Father and the angels and the saints in heaven. He has the joy of knowing that we will live because he did all that. When we fix our eyes on him during this Lenten season, we share that joy. That joy carries us through the pain of this life so that we too can endure.

II.

When I was in high school, my first non-farm job, was in a department store. And as I was learning the ropes, the owner of the store told me, "Fast race horses come out of the gate fast and try to lead all the way. Smart horses follow the leader and then sprint ahead at the end." He was trying to get me to follow the lead of people who knew what they were doing on the job. Now, we can't really ever sprint ahead of Jesus. He is our leader all the way home. But his life does show us the best path for our lives. **Fix your eyes on Jesus. He leads us in our race.**

That's really where our reading starts: "**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.**" In the chapter before this, God gives a long list of people who had lived by faith. They were all still living when they died. They all longed to see Jesus, but only saw him from a distance by faith because they all died before he was born. But by faith, they defied persecution and conquered kingdoms and administered justice. That crowd of witnesses points us to the true leader of the race we run.

So God calls us to throw off everything that hinders us in our faith. It's kind of ironic, but not everything that gets in the way of our faith is necessarily sinful, in and of itself. It's not a sin to work hard and have a good job. It's not a sin to have a nice house. It's not a sin to be popular and go to parties and enjoy movies and sporting events – at least, it's not as long as you remember what God says is a sin and what you dare not do. But even if you stay on the right side of the line, some of those things might become problems for your faith. You might get so caught up in work that you never have time to come to church. You might worry so much about your house payments and taking care of your property that you neglect your marriage and you harm your faith in Christ. The house and the job aren't sins: your attitude toward them is. God tells us to free ourselves from the things that we get all caught up with here that distract us from what is really important.

Of course, he also tells to throw off the sin that so easily entangles us. It's so easy to get caught in temptation. It's so easy to commit the same sins over and over again. We all do it – me first of all. Our sinful flesh likes to sin and we all have sins that our own sinful nature especially likes to commit. We need to throw off those sins and run our race. How? By fixing our eyes on Jesus. He is the model of Christian faith and life. We never see Jesus indulging his sins, just for a minute and then he'll pull back. We never see Jesus putting his faith on the back burner so he can deal with other things first. Jesus shows us a life of commitment to God that never fails. And that is the course laid out for us: commitment to God, no matter how many people try to push

us off the track, no matter how many sins try to drag us back, no matter how much our sinful nature wants to do something else.

But the problem is, we can't follow Jesus, not perfectly. So we first need to understand that Jesus is more than just a model of a Christian life for us. His life counts for us. His perfect race is now ours. He lived and he died and he rose to erase all that sin that we fall into over and over again. We are free and forgiven. In that forgiveness, we have power. In that forgiveness, Jesus works to give us strength to turn away from temptation. He perfects our faith. So now he calls us to run with perseverance – with endurance. Run, even while uncountable obstacles throw themselves in your way. Run, because Jesus ran for you.

The reading ends by saying, **“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”** There is nothing we have to face that Jesus didn't endure. Every day he was here, he faced the opposition of sinful men. The easiest thing in the world would've been for him to go back to heaven and leave us to our fate. At his trial and on the cross, Jesus faced mockery and brutality and hatred. And he could have come down from that cross. But he stayed there because he loves us. His love powers our endurance. His power reaches through the gospel into our hearts and changes us. His grace renews us after every sin and failure. It picks us up so that we can start again today. So my friends, run. Today. The course laid out for you. Don't give up. It will be hard. But Jesus will lead you every step of the way. Fix your eyes on him, and you will go where he goes.

Today, we see Jesus taking the final steps to make all that happen. Today is Palm Sunday. For one brief moment, Jesus was backed by the crowds as he marched in triumph into Jerusalem as the true king. But even that day was marred by the opposition of sinful men who asked him to silence the crowd. Every step he took, Jesus knew was a step closer to the cross. But he endured that cross. He scorned its shame. He died there and then he rose. He will run with us the course God has laid out for us. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Amen.