

**Introduction:**

- A. It is interesting to hear the names of those who were part of this congregation before our time. People who loved this fellowship as we do, who came here to study Scripture and worship, who prayed for each other, for this community, and for missionaries. Who fretted about church finances and recruited teachers. Who invested in students who today serve the Lord all over the world. People who sat within these same warm walls, on these same pews, and looked a thousand times at this same Celtic cross. I've looked through the oldest board minutes we have—beginning in 1978—and I look at those names; some I know, some I don't. None of them here now. I'm thankful for them... for those who figured out the cost of an ad in the paper, and who would teach the Sunday School class on Jonah, and their plans to visit newcomers to Vernon Hills.

**But what is really important in the end is not who began this good work but how they each finished.** When I think back to Christian groups I've been a part of—my college friends, or the young adult group I led, or the church I pastored in Pennsylvania—when I hear names from long ago what I always wonder first is, *Are they still walking with Jesus?* Some aren't. And it isn't because they were persecuted or because Christianity couldn't stand up to tough scrutiny.

**I look across this congregation** and I wonder, *will we each finish the course? Will we persevere in our faith?*

- B. Turn to **Heb. 12**. The book of Hebrews gives Christians profound reasons to vigilantly guard our faith in Christ till we are safely home. Today we look at the conclusion of this great letter. The key statement in our text is this in **v.1**, *“let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”* Our English translation obscures that this is the main clause and the three other phrases are focused on this: (1) *Having such a cloud of witnesses*, (2) *having laid aside every weight & sin*, (main) ***let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us***, (3) *fixing our gaze on Jesus*.

The Christian life is a marathon. The course marked out is different for each of us. We don't control the course or conditions. It isn't up to us whether we run in rain or sunshine, whether the hills are at the beginning or end, whether we suffer injury or run strong. We don't know whether it is a long race or short. There is much about our Christian life that is up to God alone. **But what we can do we must do.** *“We must run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”* The three phrases around that statement give us three essential practices if we are to finish the race. You will not finish if you do not do these things.

V.1 begins, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...”* Or *“having such a great cloud of witnesses...”* In the chapter before this we watched a grand procession of Old Testament believers who trusted God heroically, even though they never received in their lifetimes what God had promised. We read this and imagine these people now in the grandstands of heaven watching how we run the race which they've completed. *“A cloud of witnesses.”* That's a powerful picture.

But there is another way in which this word *witnesses* is used in the Bible. Usually *witnesses* (the Greek word gives us our word *martyrs*)—usually, *witnesses* refers to those giving testimony, like witnesses in a courtroom. In this case, these Old Testament believers have been summoned by the author not just to watch us but **to testify to us about the life of faith.** Heb. 11 begins, *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”*

Then, here come the exemplars of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah who *“when warned about things **not yet seen**, in holy fear built an ark to save his family,”* Abraham and Sarah who *“did not know where they were going,”* who were *“looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.”* *“All these people were still living by faith **when they died**. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.”*

We hear the testimony of others who by faith, passed on to their descendants only the promise of God's blessing *someday*. Abram blessing Isaac, Isaac blessing Jacob, Jacob blessing Joseph. Moses' parents whose blessing resulted in him "*regarding disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.*"

There were those whose faith opened the sea and brought down the walls of Jericho. **Vv.32-40...**

What do all these people have to do with us? Why tell us all this?

**I. YOU WILL ONLY PERSEVERE IN YOUR FAITH IF YOU LIVE NOW FOR THE HOPE AND HOME YOU CANNOT YET SEE**

- A. Each of these witnesses come before us to testify of their confidence in what they hoped for and their assurance of what they could not see. And then, it is as if each of them—Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses—each in their turn, points at you, and says, "*And you have what we longed for. You have Christ!*" All the promises of God are stamped *YES* when you have Christ!
- B. One reason God has given us the stories of these people in the Old Testament is so they can testify to us—so they can *bear witness*—to just what it costs, just what it looks like, to live as aliens and strangers in this world. We are *surrounded by this great cloud of testifiers* brought forward to convince you and me to "*run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*"
- C. Is your life framed and focused by the promises of God? Do you live in this world now as someone displaced, someone whose treasures are stored elsewhere, whose city you have not yet seen? Do you run against the crowd, against the culture? What do you want to leave behind? What's your legacy going to be? Your relationship with Christ must set you apart in this world, like light in darkness, like sojourners among the settled, ambassadors in a foreign land. If that's not the case, you are not likely to finish the race.

The second clause that gives shape to the command, “*run with perseverance the race marked out for us,*” is also in **v.1**, “*let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*”

## **II. YOU WILL ONLY PERSEVERE IF YOU REGULARLY THROW OFF SPIRITUAL DEAD WEIGHT AND ENTANGLING SIN**

- A. Faith doesn't die in someone because they run into questions their faith can't bear. Faith doesn't actually die in the arena facing lions. **Faith falls under the weight of our worldliness and is tripped up by the sins we indulge.** Jesus said that the good seed of the gospel dies in some because it is “*choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.*”
- B. I looked back through Hebrews to see what kinds of things this writer was thinking about. One is **when our hearts are too hard to enter into the rest Jesus offers.** Hard hearts complain. They constantly put God to the test. They “go astray” and make no effort to know God's ways [3:7-11]. That is what trips up faith. That is why believers don't finish.
- C. Every growing Christian regularly takes stock of their faith. **Not if they believe, but if their faith powers their progress.** So, this week, what sin have you dealt with? How have you nourished your life with Christ? Have you been aware of anything that is really weighing down your walk with Jesus? Christians who persevere do those things regularly. *Illus.:* We were with friends not long ago who are facing some great hurts and whose future has become very murky. I saw my friend poring over a well-used Bible as he does every morning. I heard her talking about the struggle to forgive and not grow bitter. That's what Christians do when they want to persevere. That's why we have quiet times with the Lord, why we come to church and join a Growth Group. That's why we examine our lives, and why we give up certain practices and priorities, that's why we deal with the spiritual dead weight and the sins in our lives so that we might “*run the race marked out for us.*”

The most important practice if we are to persevere is in **vv.2-3...**

### III. YOU WILL ONLY PERSEVERE IF YOU FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS

There are basically two reasons here why we must do this:

- A. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Those Old Testament saints had faith in God long before Jesus, yet he is said to be the pioneer of faith; the *author, founder*. The point is that Jesus made the life of faith work. If it weren't for Jesus, the walk of faith would be pointless. Faith in what? For what? He brings the promises of God within our grasp. He alone opens the door to heaven. He holds the keys to death and Hades. He conquers Satan. Our faith is *in Jesus*. So when we run, we keep our eyes on Jesus because he is who we trust.

Being the 'perfecter' of our faith means he completes it. Nothing is left for faith to work. Hebrews has taught us that Jesus' death is sufficient to pay for all our sins so that we can come boldly to the throne of grace. Now resurrected and seated at God's right hand, Christ lives to intercede for us. All our trust in God's word is guaranteed by Jesus. Our faith is not effective because we are such good *believers*, but because Jesus has made faith completely effective.

People all around us think there is some merit in simply being 'people of faith.' But faith needs a finisher! Jesus takes our faith, rough and doubting as it is, and he finishes what our faith can't do alone. He makes our faith effective. **So keep your eyes on him! He wrote the book on living by faith and he makes the life of faith work.**

- B. We also fix our eyes on Jesus because he guarantees us that trusting God in our trials will lead to triumph. V.2b-3... Do you remember how Jesus said that anyone who wants to be his disciple must take up their cross and follow him. In whatever you are facing—whatever frustration or trial or sorrow—when we bear that as Jesus bore the cross—**dying to ourselves, surrendering to God and his purposes, resolved not to sin under pressure**—that is what it means to take up our cross. We fix our eyes on Jesus, our pioneer, because we can see him enduring far more than we must—all at the hands of sinners—and now he waits "*at the right hand of the throne of God*" to welcome us home.

C. When the frustrations and sorrows of this wicked world are making life feel like the 25<sup>th</sup> mile of a 26-mile marathon *fix your eyes on Jesus*. He will share this trouble with you. He will run alongside you. He will fortify you in your faith with his resurrection strength. He will tell you the truth, and he will remind you of the glory just ahead.

## Conclusion

**Not all who make a profession of faith in Christ finish the race.** It is a sobering truth. Nothing in all of life matters more than to finish with Christ. So take heed to this passage:

- You will only persevere in your faith if you live now for the hope and home you cannot yet see
- You will only persevere if you regularly throw off spiritual dead weight and entangling sin
- You will only persevere if you fix your eyes on Jesus.

*Illus.:* About a month ago Rebecca Bruch ran the Chicago Marathon, along with about 45,000 others. It had been on her bucket list and she'd trained hard for it. 26.2 miles. She was nervous, and it was hard to wait for her group to be released. She said that there was a woman near her at the beginning with the Bible reference, Philippians 4:13, on her shirt. *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* That brought her a sense of calm.

She needed the encouragement because the race took a toll. Her hip, which had been giving her trouble, got worse. Her feet hurt. At mile 15 she said she just couldn't run any more, and had to walk, but she kept going. All along the route, she'd see people holding up signs with Bible verses on them. She especially loved running by Moody Bible Institute where many cheered her on and held up verses. She said, "It was like God was putting reminders along the way. Keep going. Finish the race." Which is what God does in our Christian lives. She said it is a great analogy for the Christian life. Heb 10 says, *"let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."*

As she neared the finish line, she determined to sprint regardless of the pain. She said, “It was the most painful thing I’ve ever done, but I did it.”

This morning, Becky ran a 15K race in Chicago. Just 9.3 miles! She didn’t know what I was preaching on but she had chosen to run meditating on this very verse, “*Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*” Whatever race the Lord has marked out for you, run... with perseverance.