



*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and <sup>w</sup>sin which clings so closely, and <sup>x</sup>let us run <sup>y</sup>with endurance the race that is <sup>z</sup>set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, <sup>a</sup>who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising <sup>b</sup>the shame, and <sup>c</sup>is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*<sup>3 d</sup>Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or <sup>e</sup>fainthearted. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*

As I sat in my office this past week, I heard the familiar voice of an old friend down the hallway. As soon as I heard his greeting, I knew who it was. (As a side note, isn't it amazing that God has given us voices that are so distinct and characteristic?) This friend was from my former church who I had not seen in many years. He stopped by the church because he had gotten lost. He recently started a new job as an insurance agent working with farmers. He had been meandering down some back roads which eventually dumped him onto County B and right past our church. We had a nice time catching up with one another and being mutually shocked at how quickly our kids have grown up.

My friend told me an interesting story. In his former job he had been a district manager over 20 insurance agents. He explained that the younger agents were eager to learn, listened well and worked hard to meet their quotes. However, because the older agents had built such a large insurance business over the years—making hundreds of thousands of dollars per year—they only needed to work about 3 days per week to keep the and enormous income business going.

Though from a human perspective I might choose to do the same as these insurance agents if I were in their shoes, from a business perspective and from the perspective of my friend who managed them, they were lazy and unproductive. They were resting on their prior success. They had no motivation to move forward.

As Christians, we can be like this. We can become lazy, unproductive and unmotivated in our walk with the Lord. Like these insurance agents, this can result from spiritual success. We may have come a long way in spiritual maturity and we feel it is enough. We are free of addictions. We are good parents. We serve in the church. Basically, everything seems to be moving along quite well. But still, something is not quite right. We have lost some of our joy. We are coasting through life just getting by

We are going to ask two questions this morning: *what is joy?* and *what are the hindrances to joy?*

Joy is a pursuit. Verse one spells it out: *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* The Christian life is a race and the author has one word for us—run! Run the race. Don't sit back and admire the trophies from your prior races. Don't merely swap stories about races you ran years ago. Don't tell me how you used to be a good runner. Run! Run now.

This is the theme that runs through all of Hebrews. This book contains five main sections that serve as warning passages. Some of them are more severe in nature. 3:12 reads, *See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" 5:12 is a bit softer: *In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food.*"

If you have turned away from God you probably wouldn't even be here this morning, but I think a large number of us are merely coasting through the Christian life. Joy is something that must be pursued. The Christian life is a race and if you are not running and pursuing, then in what sense are you in the race?

Second, Joy is a not only a pursuit it is a righteous pursuit. We know that joy is a righteous pursuit because Jesus pursued joy. *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,* <sup>2</sup> *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.*

The Creator of the universe pursued the thing which would make him the most joyful. This HAS to give us all a new meaning of the word joy. For Jesus there was a joy that ran much deeper than the physical suffering. Jesus endured the cross and despised the shame of his cross because in his own pursuit of joy he looked past the difficulties and into something much better. This is why the word *joy* and the word *enjoy* have two very different meanings. Jesus did not enjoy enduring the cross and scorning it shame but it was all a part of pursuing his own joy. As Christians and especially as American Christians, we are far too concerned about enjoying the Christian life. Where did we learn this? Where did we learn to pursue enjoyment instead of joy? Certainly not from Jesus.

Joy must be continually pursued. You cannot stockpile joy. This means that joy has a shelf life. If you try to bottle your joy and stick on a shelf for later, it will turn sour. It will rot away. Joy is a bit like manna—whatever you don't use will not keep for tomorrow. Joy must be pursued every day. It is something that must be cultivated and grown at all times.

Third, joy is a righteous pursuit of Jesus and his glory: *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.* I like how the NIV puts it—*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.* Heaven is not the finish line, Jesus is. Jesus is the end of the race. Jesus is the prize. Jesus is the pursuit. Therefore, we must fix our eyes on the prize. Many of you have already experienced your teenage sons and daughters getting their driver's licenses. You know what it is like to help them accrue their hours of practice behind the wheel. The two cardinal rules for new drivers are: keep two hands on the steering wheel and fix your eyes on the road. "Fix your eyes on the road, son!" Don't wave at your friends in the other lane. Don't turn on the radio and switch stations. Fix your eyes on the road and for the believer, fix your eyes on Jesus.

Like Paul does so often, our author is using a metaphor of a running race. Can you imagine if a sprinter got distracted by a pretty woman in the stands who was waving to him? Can you imagine a runner who looked down at their watch to see what time it was in the middle of the race? Not only would these runners not win the race, they may not even finish the race.

What was Jesus pursuing in his race? This passage tells us that Jesus was pursuing his own joy but what exactly was he pursuing? It would be partly tight to say that he was pursuing us, after all, he endured the cross and despised its shame in order to redeem us from the pit of hell. Yes, Jesus pursued our redemption but he pursued our redemption for his glory and for the Father's glory. I find many believers who don't understand this concept. We see the cross of Jesus as something that he did for us and then we take it a step further and think, "I must really be lovable because Jesus really loves me."

Jesus did not die in our place because we were inherently lovable. Jesus took our place on the bloody, shameful cross because we were unlovable sinners. This is what Paul wrote in Romans 5:8. *But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* The NIV reads—*But God demonstrates his love for us.* In the cross the love of God was on display. The love of God was demonstrated and magnified not because we were so lovable but just the opposite—because we were so unlovable. When did God show his love for us? *While* we were *still* sinners! If we were good people and Jesus died for us—that would not have been love—it would have been suicide.

Picture this scenario. A few of us are at a gun range shooting at targets. I've got my handgun and I am trying to hit the target 26 yards away when all of a sudden you come tearing out of nowhere, run in front of the target and scream, "I'll take this bullet for you!" and you jump in front of the target and are struck in the head with a 9 millimeter bullet. Your death would be tragic but the coroner would be forced to rule your death as either insanity or suicide. Either you didn't know what you were doing or else you wanted to die because I didn't need to be saved. You didn't need to take a bullet for me. In the same way, if we were good people that means that we didn't need to be saved and therefore Jesus didn't need to die so his death on the cross was

either insanity or suicide. It would have been intentional and purposeful—but unnecessary martyrdom. The substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross demonstrates God’s infinite love not because we were lovable but because we were so unlovable. The greater our sin and the more we were trapped in our lost state, the greater the love of God is displayed. The joy that was set before Jesus was not our redemption but rather his own glory and the glory of the Father.

Still not convinced? Let’s read it from Jesus’ own mouth.

<sup>8</sup> *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.* <sup>9</sup> *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.* <sup>10</sup> *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.*

<sup>11</sup> *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

(John 15:8-11)

According to Jesus, what brings the Father more glory? The Father is glorified when we bear much fruit. Verse ten spells it out more clearly. *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.* Jesus always obeyed the father. Jesus went to the cross out of obedience to his Father and obedience to his Father *glorifies* the Father.

I explain all of this so that we will better understand exactly what it means to “fix our eyes on Jesus.” We are to fix our eyes on the magnificent, infinite obedience and love of the Son who went to the cross to bring glory to his Father. Therefore, when we pursue the glory of God, we get joy as a by-product of that pursuit. If you try to pursue joy as an end in itself, you will get nothing. It is like trying to grab the mist. But if you pursue the glory of God, you will get joy as a by-product.

Furthermore, we are told that Jesus is *founder and perfecter of our faith*. We know that Jesus was the founder of our faith but he is also the perfecter—or finisher—of our faith. In other words, we don’t run the race and struggle through the race so that we will be saved. We run the race because we are saved. If we were not saved, we would not even be in the race. Also, Jesus guarantees that we will finish the race. He is the finisher of our faith. All true believers will finish the race. This is God’s part. We cannot start the race and we cannot finish the race but our responsibility is to run the race. We can rest in the finished work of Christ. He has finished the race for us but we still have to run!

This leads to our fourth point: Joy is a righteous pursuit of Jesus and his glory which requires endurance and struggle. And in this struggle, there are hindrances to our pursuit of joy.

The first hindrance is from verse one—*the sin which clings closely*. The NIV calls it “the sin that so easily entangles.” This word carries the idea of something that is constricting, obstructing or distracting. This sin clings closely to you. It entangles you and traps you. It reminds me of swimming in a lake with lots of algae and when you walk up to shore and out of the lake you are covered in the stuff. It clings closely to you. It entangles you and must be peeled off a layer at a time.

This is what Jonah experienced when the sailors cast him into the sea.

<sup>3</sup> *You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*  
<sup>4</sup> *I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'*  
<sup>5</sup> *The engulfing waters threatened me, deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head.*  
<sup>6</sup> *To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

In the raging sea, Jonah was literally being engulfed by the waters. He even described the seaweed that was wrapped around his head. It was clinging closely to him and pulling him down into the depths of the sea. This is how some of you feel this morning. You feel like a sin is clinging closely to you and dragging you down. This sin has entangled you and you and it is pulling you under. But you don't have to stay there. The solution to this entanglement is the same one chosen by Jonah.

*But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.*  
<sup>7</sup> *"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD,  
and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*  
<sup>8</sup> *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.*  
<sup>9</sup> *But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you.  
What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."*

Literally, as he was sinking to the bottom of the ocean, Jonah cried out in repentance to the Lord. He said 'I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to your holy temple.' If you have a sin that is clinging closely and has entangled you, rescue is a mere breath away. Do you recall what happened next? *And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.* ☺

The second hindrance is also found in verse one—*Lay aside every weight*. Unlike the sin that clings closely, this weighty thing in our lives may not necessarily be a sin. But it is a weight. It slows us down. This weight hinders our pursuit of joy. But also unlike the sin that entangles, these weights in our lives may not be easy to identify. Many of the weight are good things which may be OK for one person but God is telling you to let it go. It may be a good thing but to much of a good thing. It might just be a complete waste of time but you do it anyway.

We all approach these kinds of things with a familiar question: What's wrong with it? There are two big problems with this question. First, inherent in the question is the attempt to get away with things. This person wants to justify their actions. They most likely want to take the fun way, or easy way or path of least resistance. The question "what's wrong with it?" is usually followed with someone saying, "Hey, what's the big deal, anyway? What's the harm in it? And the other problem with this question is that when you ask "What's wrong with it?" you will always miss the more important questions—"What's right with it? What is the best thing?"

It's like Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians. *All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful.* "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything. What you are carrying is lawful but it is still a weight. What is the weight that you need to throw off of your shoulders? We are told in this passage to "lay it aside." Again, this weight may not be a sinful thing. It may be good in many ways, but it is hindering your pursuit of joy in the Lord. For some it may be as

simple as the amount of time you spend on facebook. Maybe you need to take a 2-4 week facebook fast. For others your hobbies get in the way.

The friend who dropped by this week probably had more hobbies and more toys than anyone I have ever met. The problem was that his hobbies greatly interfered with his family life. I will never forget the time that about forty men went to a Promise Keepers conference in Minneapolis and we all shared about our experience in church. During the sharing time, this one friend called his wife to the front of the church and made some strong commitments to her about letting go of his hobbies and spending time with her and the kids. But the most memorable part of that incident happened when his wife, in front of the entire church, looked up at him with her arms crossed in front of her and said, "We'll see." Ouch. You could have heard a pin drop. You could tell from her words and her tone that he had made many promises in the past that he did not keep. It took many years but this man has finally let go of many of his hobbies and he reported to me that his family life is better than ever. These things had been a serious weight that he needed to lay aside. What weight is God asking you to lay aside?

The final hindrance comes in verse three. *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* Unfortunately, this is an apt description of many believers—they are weary and fainthearted. But on the other hand, the author realizes that this is a common hindrance to joy. In other words, if you are weary and fainthearted I don't want you to also feel depressed and condemned because you are weary and fainthearted. Do you get what I mean by that? There are two ways to handle this. Either I could say, "What wrong with you? Why have you lost your joy? Why are you weary and fainthearted?" I could guilt and a generous dose of condemnation on top of your weariness. But that would be cruel and grace-less.

Instead, and I am convinced that this is the intent of the author, if you are weary and fainthearted, the Lord has compassion for you. He knows the deep weariness of your soul. He knows how your heart is tired and prone to faint. This is why I love the description of Jesus in Matthew 12:20. *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.* Some of you this morning are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks but we have this promise from Jesus that he will not break you and he will not snuff you out.

If you are entangled by a sin, you need to repent. If you are carrying a burdensome weight, you need to lay it aside. If you are weary and fainthearted, you need to consider Jesus. This does not mean, think about what a nice thing he did for me or not even, look at this great sacrifice he did on my behalf. When we consider Jesus we must think deeply about how he has actually changed us. Not how he will yet change us, though that is exciting, but how he has already changed us. Consider that you were dead and now you are alive.  
Consider that Jesus caused you to pass over from death to life.  
Consider that you are dead to sin and that it no longer has mastery over you.  
Consider that he removed your heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh.  
Consider that you are a new creation in Christ.  
Consider that he is the founder and finisher of your faith.

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<sup>w</sup> See Eph. 4:22

<sup>x</sup> See 1 Cor. 9:24

<sup>y</sup> See ch. 10:36

<sup>z</sup> ch. 6:18

<sup>a</sup> Luke 24:26; Phil. 2:8; [Isa. 53:11]

<sup>b</sup> Ps. 22:6, 7; 69:19; Isa. 53:3

<sup>c</sup> ch. 1:3

<sup>d</sup> [Matt. 10:24; Rev. 2:3]

<sup>e</sup> Gal. 6:9