

WHAT DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU LOOK TO JESUS?

SERIES: STORIES OF FAITH,
HEBREWS 11



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Hebrews 12:1-3
Final Message
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Hebrews 12:1-3

It is great to be back with you this morning to look at the Word of God together. I returned from sabbatical this week, and people keep telling me that it's great to have me back. But after eight weeks of not having to think about COVID restrictions and mask mandates and whether to hold worship indoors or outdoors, I'm having a hard time saying it's great to be back to those things. But I can honestly say it's great to be back among everyone, and I'm excited to be able to worship together.

When I left on sabbatical, I shared that I'd be doing a lot of activities that began with "R"—reading, reflecting, resting. I did all of that, and I'll talk more about those things. But I also did a lot of running. For most of my life, I hated running. I used to joke that I would try to run and pray, but the only thing I could pray for was that the pain would stop.

However, five years ago, I tried running again, and for some reason, it clicked. Since then, I've run over 4000 miles. If you know any runners, you know they love to talk about running. In my preaching, I've tried to restrain most of that. Then I get assigned a passage where the main metaphor is a comparison between faith and running! So I'll apologize in advance, but I feel like I have permission to talk about running this morning.

Running has actually become a big part of my spiritual life. So I'm excited to share some of that with you. And I'm also excited to share from our passage this morning. I did something different to prepare for this sermon. I knew I'd be preaching this immediately after coming back from my sabbatical, so instead of studying the passage the way I usually do, I decided to do a ton of reflection on it. I memorized all two verses and recited them every day over the past few months. Sometimes I dwelled on the passage for a long time. Sometimes I thought about it at random points throughout the day.

Hebrews 12:1-2:

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.

At the beginning of my sabbatical, I wrote each of the ten phrases from these verses on a separate index card. Whenever something occurred to me about that phrase, I wrote it down. What that means is that this sermon is going to be a bit of a buffet. There are a lot of different thoughts. I can't promise that everything fits together. Instead of a regular three-point sermon, I have a seven phrase sermon.

One of those phrases did stand out to me the most: "looking to Jesus." Those words ran through my head every day of my sabbatical. The question that I kept coming back to over and over again was a simple one: What do I see when I look at Jesus? If I'm looking at the face of Jesus, what do I see on his face?

The main question for us to consider this morning is "What do you see when you look to Jesus?"

Since we are surrounded

Our passage describes a scene that would be very well understood in the first century. It's actually very timely for us as well since we're in the middle of the Summer Olympics. The image is of a race in a huge stadium. We are the ones who are running.

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The first phrase pictures the stands of that stadium: “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” Over the past few weeks, we’ve heard about the heroes of the faith. Now, the author imagines that crowd of people sitting in the stands of a stadium as you are running. All of those heroes—giants of faithfulness—are cheering you on as you run.

Abel. Enoch. Noah. Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Jacob. Joseph. Moses. Rahab. They are cheering for you. They have run their race. Now they’re cheering you on as you run yours.

Let’s be clear: the race is faith in Jesus. Many parts of your life might be compared to a race. Your career might feel like a marathon; your marriage; your school program; a project you’re working on. You run a lot of races in life. But the race we’re talking about here is the race of faith—trusting Jesus day after day through all the ups and downs. Can you keep believing that Jesus is Lord and live your life following him?

Let us lay aside

As we run that race, the author encourages us to lay aside two things that slow us down. He talks about “every weight” and “sin which clings so closely.” Weight and sin.

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That’s helpful to me. The last year has felt really weighty to me. When I hear “weight”, I think about all the burdens of life. The stuff I’m tempted to carry on my shoulders. The extra weight that I think is up to me and is my responsibility to take care of.

Is there something you’re carrying that slows you down? Is there a weight that you need to lay aside?

The author also talks about sin. Those are the things I’m tempted to do as a distraction from the race. When the race gets too hard, I want to quit. Each of us has our

favorite ways to distract ourselves from the difficulty of the race. Lust. Greed. Gossip. Self-promotion. Deceit. Worshiping success or achievement or image.

The author says sin clings so closely. What an accurate image. These things become habits. You can’t lay them aside easily because they cling to you. But all of them make the race of faith much harder.

When you’re running, you can’t carry extra weight, and you can’t get distracted by other things.

Run With Endurance

When the author gets to the main instruction, he emphasizes one aspect of running.

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Endurance. Run with endurance. The Greek dictionary translates that word as “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty.” This is what faith feels like. Faith is holding out or bearing up in the face of difficulty. Faith doesn’t always feel like victory. It doesn’t always feel like purpose and meaning. Faith is holding out or bearing up.

For the first few years of running, I kept waiting for it to get easier. I thought that if I got in shape enough, I’d be able to go for a run and not work hard. But no matter what distance I’ve built up to, it is always hard work when I go out for a run.

What I’ve come to love about running is that it may be hard, but it’s simple. So much of life is complex and confusing. There are different priorities and complicated issues to consider. But running is simple. All you have to do is keep going. You just pick up one foot, put it down, and then do the same thing with the other foot.

I think we tend to make the life of faith more complicated than it needs to be. To run the race of faith,

you just have to keep believing. That's all. Keep going forward with Jesus. That's what the author is encouraging us to do: keep going.

Life is complicated. There are so many decisions. Ups and downs. Frustrations and victories. Life is complex. But faith is simple. It's not easy, but it is simple. No matter what decision you make, do it in faith. When you get frustrated, be frustrated in faith. When you win, have faith. When you lose, have faith. The Christian life is not nearly as complicated as we make it. Just keep believing.

One of the things that makes faith in Jesus hard is that we focus on other things or other people. I want to ask you to do a bit of reflection, and we're going to share our thoughts with each other. All of us have people we tend to focus on in our lives. Who are the voices that carry the most weight in your life?

You can share your thoughts by going to our online poll. You'll see a simple question: "Who do you look to?" You can list up to three people or kinds of people. Whose approval matters most to you? Whose voices do you hear in your head?

Over the last eighteen months, there have been so many people I've looked to: government leaders, fellow elders and pastors, my spouse and children, and many of you.

What I've realized is that I see many different things when I look at all these people. Some of you approve of some things, and some of you disapprove. Some of my fellow pastors and elders agree with me on some of my decisions, and some disagree. In general, it feels like there are more issues to divide over lately: COVID, vaccinations, politics, racial justice.

There are so many people that I tend to look to, so many voices that I pay attention to.

One of the great gifts of taking a sabbatical is that there were fewer voices I was paying attention to. It became really clear to me that when I listen to all these different voices, I can't win. Someone is always upset. Someone always disagrees. Looking to these people will always leave me frustrated and feeling like a failure.

Looking To Jesus

That's what makes the author's next instruction so critical. This is the phrase that wouldn't stay out of my head all summer.

Hebrews 12:1-2:

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.*

Looking to Jesus is the key, the only key to running the race of faith with endurance. There is no other way to hold out or bear up under difficulty than by focusing on the face of Jesus. His is the voice that matters. His face is the one I need to look at. Over the course of my sabbatical, I spent a lot of time looking at Jesus.

I also spent a lot of building a deck in my backyard. You know by now that if I spend a lot of time doing something, you're probably going to hear about it in a sermon illustration. So it shouldn't be a surprise to hear that building a deck and looking at Jesus have a lot in common.

Building my deck involved three different parts. First, the pillars were planted in the ground or fixed to the house and gave primary support. Second, the joists spanned those pillars. They crossed large gaps to distribute the weight to the pillars. Finally, the boards lay across the joists. That's all you see when you look at the deck.

I realized that my spiritual life needs the same support. Looking to Jesus is something you build into your life. It will look different for each of us, but I think it will always have these three categories.

There will be pillars—your baptism, extended times of fellowship with God, turning points in your faith, retreats (like the upcoming Fall Retreat), personal retreats where you dedicate a day or more to prayer and solitude. These are unique grounding activities that anchor you deep in your faith.

Then there are joists—the regular, more frequent connections with God. Starting the morning off with coffee and prayer, coming to church every week, participating in a small group, going on prayer walks, reading the Bible, meditation. These are the rhythms that you build into your life to support your faith.

Finally, there are the boards—the everyday, constant presence of Jesus in your life. This is what most people see in our life. How we treat others, respond to a crisis, and react when we are wronged. This is the day to day of our lived experience.

It's the place where many of us struggle. We wonder why our days feel so out of touch with faith. We're frustrated that we don't feel God's presence more regularly. But the boards need to be held up by the pillars and the joists. They can't stand on their own.

Looking to Jesus doesn't just happen. This isn't just an attitude. Looking to Jesus shows up on your calendar. It shows up in your thought life, in your plans, in the way you organize your day. What are the pillars, joists, and boards in your life?

As I'm transitioning back from sabbatical, I'm planning activities to match each of those three categories of my spiritual life. For some of you, this might be helpful. For others, this might feel overwhelming, maybe even discouraging. It might make you feel like running is too hard. Is there a life that has sitting on the couch as its metaphor?

That's why you have to understand what it's actually like to look at the face of Jesus. I want you to imagine being the runner in this passage. Imagine yourself running inside a stadium filled with the heroes of faith from the Old Testament. They are cheering you on. And then imagine that you look up into the stands to find your benefactor, the person who sponsors you, the person you are running for. You look up into that person's face.

What do see you on the face of Jesus?

I'd like for us to share this with each other as well. Go back to the online poll and share with us what you expect to see on the face of Jesus. Be honest. We're not looking for Sunday School answers here. I don't want to know what you are supposed to expect. What do you actually expect?

How does Jesus feel about your life of faith? What does he think of the way you're running the race? What can you glean from the look on his face? What do you expect to see on Jesus' face? Keep filling that out and we'll look at the results in a moment.

I wanted to read several books during my sabbatical, but one book in particular ended up getting most of my

attention. It's called *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund. Perhaps some of you have read it. His goal in the book is to explore what lies in the heart of Christ. At his deepest core, what does Christ feel toward us? In a sense, he's answering that same question: what do we expect to see most visibly on the face of Jesus?

There's a lot that we expect to see on the face of Jesus. But if we believe the Bible—if we believe the revelation that God has given us to help us to know him and relate to him—then can say very confidently that what we will find on the face of Jesus is pure and unadulterated love.

Not expectation. Not demand. Not judgment. Not begrudging forgiveness. Not disappointment. Not annoyance. Not impatience.

The message of the gospel is that because of the work of Jesus, we see absolute approval when we look at the face of Jesus. We are loved. We are celebrated. We are accepted completely and unconditionally.

This is the main premise of Dane Ortlund's book. He suggests that not only does Jesus love us, but that love and mercy and compassion are somehow at the core of his heart and character for us. He is slow to anger, but quick to compassion. Ortlund says,

Our deepest instincts expect him to be thundering, gavel swinging, judgment relishing. We expect the bent of God's heart to be retribution to our waywardness. And then Exodus 34 taps us on the shoulder and stops us in our tracks. The bent of God's heart is mercy. His glory is his goodness.¹

The first question I asked you had to do with who you tend to look at. Then I asked you what you expect to see on the face of Jesus. I have a theory that if we could do all the research and connect all the dots, we would notice a pattern.

I think we expect to see on Jesus' face what we've seen on the faces of the people in our lives. If we grew up with disapproval, we expect Jesus to be disappointed. If we've encountered a lot of expectation, we think Jesus has high demands of us.

That's why we need the Scriptures. This is why we need to bury those pillars deep, lay those joists, and carefully place those boards of our spiritual lives because we will almost always conclude that God is unhappier with us than he actually is. We need to be reminded all the time and repeatedly that he is love and goodness and mercy.

Imagine again being the runner in our passage. You are holding up under the difficult work of the life of faith and you look up to Jesus in the stands. What do you see? Can you believe that you see love and acceptance? When you believe that, you'll want to look at his face. It's his love that drives us forward, that keeps us running. He gives us endurance. So look to Jesus.

We run not to please him. We run because he is so pleased with us.

For the joy

The next verse makes that abundantly clear. The author continues to say that Jesus ran his race because of the joy that was set before him.

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Listen to Ortlund again as he comments on this very verse:

"For the joy". What joy? What was waiting for Jesus on the other side of the cross? The joy of seeing his people forgiven.²

Think about that. The joy that drove Jesus to be faithful and endure his incredibly difficult life of faith was us. You and I redeemed and brought into the family of God. We are the joy of Christ.

It wasn't the throne—he was on the throne before. It was the result of his work: our salvation.

I used to judge people when I saw them running. This was back when I hated running. I figured that they must hate running too. So I assumed they had some deeply unhealthy motivation for torturing themselves—body image issues or an addiction to pain or something nefarious.

But believe it or not, I like to run. I get joy from running. I get extra joy when I'm done running, but

I also look forward to a run. I remember runs fondly. There is joy surrounding all of it.

I think we need more joy in our life of faith. We need to remember that this is all worth it. That difficulty and joy can go hand in hand.

The Cross and the Shame

We've already said that the life of faith is not easy. Jesus modeled that. He endured the cross and he despised the shame.

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That's personal pain and social pain. We will suffer and we will be scorned. The life of faith is difficult, but it is simple, and it can be filled with joy.

One of the main reasons the life of faith can be filled with joy is because of where faith is headed.

Seated at the right hand

The author concludes the metaphor by describing where Jesus is sitting—not where he will sit, but where he is currently sitting.

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As we are looking to Jesus, he is seated at the right hand of God's throne. He is seated in a place of victory. He has run his race. He has won his race. His victory reminds us that we are destined for victory.

Remember that hope is the distinctive element of the Christian life. Only because of Christ can we have hope that extends past this life. A lot of what I've said this morning could be said in a secular setting: keep going, think positive, focus on people who approve of you.

The truly unique thing about faith in Christ is that we believe we are destined for victory. If you believe in Jesus, you are destined for victory. So keep going. Look to Jesus and run with hope.

You are running a race. Or maybe, in reality, you're crawling a race. You often forget to look to Jesus. You look to many other things. You carry extra weight. You get distracted by sin, which clings to you. Your deck is rickety and barely held together. The pillars are too lost. The joists aren't strong enough. Your boards are splintered.

But if you believe in Jesus, two things are true. When you look at the face of Jesus, you will see approval and love and mercy. Also, when you get to the end of the race, you will be crowned a winner.

Conclusion

We end our series in Hebrews 11 with the very same verse that we started with. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for."

When Scott Grant taught that passage, he said that what we hope for is "the heavenly and eternal country that is filled with the presence of God." Joy that lasts forever. Belonging in a community that values you. Approval and celebration. Being known and cherished. This is what we hope for. Faith points us forward to that.

Running has helped me to endure. I've actually faced situations in life that I wanted to escape and thought, *all I need to do is keep putting one foot in front of another*, which has helped me make it through.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to endure by looking at the face of Jesus. I want you to know how much he loves you. I want you to sense his complete approval in the depths of your soul. And I want you to know that we will end this race with him in victory.

Endnotes

1. Dane C Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 147.
2. Ibid.