

Hebrews 12:1-3 With Christ, We Will Finish the Race! Pentecost 22 October 25-26, 2015

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Grace and peace to give us the victory are ours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Considering the perils and hardships of faith, God's Word encourages us to be steadfast in Hebrews 12:1-3 This is Your Word, heavenly Father. Keep us strong in faith as Your people. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear Christian Friends, on our way to victory,

I have never met a person who was glad to lose. People don't watch sports hoping that their team loses. They want to experience winning. Yet, spiritually many people in life, even many Christians, don't seem to mind losing by giving up their faith for things of little value. They are turning to things which temporarily satisfy, but in the end they will weigh them down in judgment. We don't want this to happen to us or anyone we love. We need God's help if we are to remain faithful and to endure the challenges so that:

With Christ, we will finish the race!

First, remember those who have already finished the race. Our verse states, *"We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses... (v.1)* So often Christians feel outnumbered by unbelievers in the world. But, God wants us to step back and view all the believers who have ever lived. Like a massive cloud, the Old Testament heroes of faith give us examples of endurance and triumph. These verses do not picture saints watching us; but their lives of faith are "witnessing" to us. Hebrews 11 listed Abel who was murdered for his faith; Enoch, who was terribly grieved by an ungodly world at his time; and Noah, who was completely outnumbered by evil until the flood, yet by God's grace he was saved. Hebrews also mentions Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and His promises to them; Joseph, whose bones were carried out of Egypt by Moses and believers of his time; there also were judges of Israel, prophets, and many others. All of them lived by faith until the end of their lives, telling us to not give up. That "great cloud" of witnesses continues to grow including our grandparents, parents, spouse, friends, or children who persevered and won the eternal prize.

Second, believers are pictured as runners ridding themselves of anything that obstructs them. *"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." (v.1)* Some members have run 26-mile marathons. People can't just walk up to a starting line and run without preparation. They need endurance. So, we need to take God's Word to heart to prepare us for the course of life God has set for us. We don't want an obstacle to keep us from finishing our race. People are tempted to reject the help Christ gives. Many of Jesus' neighbors rejected Him and His Word. Another time a rich man walked away because his money was more important to him than Jesus. Another time a man put his family ahead of his relationship with Jesus. In themselves money, family, and activities are blessings from God, unless they become more important to us than Jesus. Some Christians give up or stop looking for the right goal. This happened to Judas when greed took over his life. It happened to King Solomon when his many heathen wives led him to worship false gods, although he may have repented. Too many Christians get turned aside by temptations and lose sight of eternal life.

Third, Jesus gives strength to reach the goal. Our verses state, *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..., who endured the cross, scorning its shame.... Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (v.3)* The key word is endured. In Hebrews earlier, we read of so many believers whom God brought safely to heaven. These people did not have easier lives than us. They all had their trials and temptations. But, they also had God's encouragement to finish the course of their lives with Christ.

Like them we are to “*fix our eyes on Jesus.*” (v.2) Jesus had a perfect trust during humble His life on earth. He never questioned God’s directions. He willingly suffered rejection, persecution, and death. It wasn’t just the pain of the cross. Jesus was carrying the punishment for the sins of the world. The shame and contempt He experienced did not stop Him because He knew His goal. He took all our sins to His grave so that death is not our end. His final goal is eternal life for us.

We also need to remember that God works in our lives in His own way and time. We need patience to wait for God to work all things for our good. Isaiah wrote, “*Even youths grow tired and weary..., but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will ... run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.*” (Isaiah 40:31) God brings us Christ’s strengthening forgiveness through His Word, which is “*the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.*” (Romans 1:16)

Fourth, we can finish the race in anticipation of the joy before us. We anticipate vacations or holidays when we do things we enjoy. Jesus had great expectations. “*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross....*” (v.2) Jesus is the author of our faith. He is the source of what we believe in to be saved. Whatever temptation we fell into, He avoided. Whatever promise of God that we have doubted, He believed and fulfilled. Although He committed no sin, Jesus suffered for all sin. He scorned or was not turned away by the curse attached to the cross: “*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.*” (Galatians 3:13) Jesus became cursed to save us from being cursed forever.

Jesus endured this suffering because He knew His goal. “*He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*” (v.2) The humble human nature of Christ entered heaven and assumed His rightful place of all power and authority over everyone and everything except God the Father. Jesus received such glory not just for Himself. He did this to win a place for us. He is the perfecter of our faith, the one who will bring our faith to its goal. Paul wrote, “*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 1:6)

So, we are also encouraged not to get sidetracked by anything or anyone who tries to keep us from our goal of eternal life. We have too much to lose to turn aside from God’s truth. Like Paul we say, “*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 3:14) Who doesn’t like to win a prize? People sign up to win food, a TV, or a trip. Think of what God gives us! We have eternal life with Christ instead of eternal darkness without Him. We have “*fullness of joy forevermore*” (Psalm 16:11) instead of eternal sadness in hell. Why would anyone who understands what Jesus freely offers settle for anything less? Peter wrote, “*... set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*” (1 Peter 1:13)

So, like it or not, we’re all in the race of our lives. It doesn’t matter how fast or slow we go; God has determined the length of our lives and the course we run. We must be alert so that nothing makes us lose our focus on the goal. Rather, we will daily look to Christ and to believers before us who have entered heaven, so we have confidence that God will supply all that we need to finish the race. Like St. Paul we will say: “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*” (2 Timothy 4:7-8) Amen.