



RACE OF FAITH

“1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

- Hebrews 12:1-3

Race of Faith

We have gone through the eleventh chapter, and we have seen this immense attempt to show that salvation comes by faith and faith alone, and that those who are God's walk by faith as well. It is both the faith of the sinner that initiates salvation, and the faith of the saint that marks his ongoing sanctification.

As we come to these three verses – we'll just look at the three verses, maybe comment on the others subsequent to that in a minute, but for this discussion, I want you to look at verses 1 through 3 of chapter 12. "Therefore," of course, ties this in with what has been previously written. "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter" – or finisher – "of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

"For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Jesus here is the ultimate model of faith. We've gone through the eleventh chapter, and we have heard about the heroes of faith from the past, from the Old Testament era, both by name and by reference, at the end of the chapter, to what happened to them.

And now we come to this really concluding statement in the opening of chapter 12 that, based upon what we have just heard, "We are called to run this race that is set before us." It is the "faith race." They ran it; they were blessed in the running; they endured to the end as we had seen. They suffered persecution – extensive persecution – even death with great courage. And we got to the pinnacle last time of the eleventh chapter and talked about the courage of faith. Based upon these testimonies, we are called to run the faith race.

Now, as a child growing up, and as an adult, frankly, I've heard this passage preached on many times. And the standard approach used to be, at least, that we're to visualize here that there's a stadium, and all of these saints are sitting there watching us as we attempt to run the race, rooting us on, cheering us to the finish line. That gives the impression that somehow the

saints who are now in heaven constitute some kind of mass of spectators who are watching us on Earth. That is not taught in Scripture. There is not one shred of evidence, anywhere on the pages of the Bible, that people in heaven are preoccupied with watching what is going on down here on Earth. That would actually defy the essence of heaven which is to be separated from all the sin and strife that goes on here. They are, as we know, lost in wonder, love, and praise, contemplating the glory of God and the wonder of the Lord Jesus Christ and the ineffable glories of heavenly life. There is no indication that they are watching what goes on here. You hear people say that all the time, “So-and-so died, but I know he’s up there” – or she’s up there – “watching down and looking over us.” And there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that that is the case.

“There is,” said Jesus, “a great gulf fixed between those who are in the presence of God and those who are out of the presence of God in the fires of hell.” And there is an equally great gulf fixed between those who are in the presence of God and anybody here still remaining on Earth.

That also brings up the fact that there are no saints in heaven who are hearing prayers by people on Earth. They do not have a preoccupation with things on Earth. As far as I can tell from the Bible, they don’t even have a connection to things on Earth or to people on Earth. And so, we have something different here than what has been so often indicated.

Now, the word that I want you to notice is the word “race” in verse 1. This is a call to run a race. Many figures of speech are used, in the New Testament in particular, to describe aspects of the Christian life. We are to put on the armor of God – that’s a metaphor – to put on the armor of God, to fight against the wiles of the Devil; to put on the armor of God like a soldier. The military metaphors are elsewhere in Scripture as you well know. Second Timothy chapter 2 and verse 3, as good soldiers we go to battle and do what we do to please the Commander.

We are also described as being engaged in a wrestling match, Ephesian 6:12, basically the same passage, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of the darkness, the spiritual powers” - meaning the demonic hosts that are behind the world system.

So, we are engaged in a war like soldiers; we're like wrestlers in a wrestling match. In 1 Corinthians 9:26, Paul describes his Christian life like a boxing match. And he says, "I'm not somebody who beats the air, but I find my opponent and I strike a blow on him." In 2 Timothy 4:7, Paul says, "I have fought the good fight" – a wrestler, a boxer, a soldier.

There are references as well, in the New Testament, to being slaves. Galatians 6:17 even indicates that Paul sees himself as a slave of Jesus Christ, who bears the brand marks of Jesus – a branded slave.

We are also described as farmers, in 2 Timothy 2, who plant crops and enjoy the harvest. We are described, in our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, as a bride, and He is being the Bridegroom. We are also described in a Father and child relationship. The Lord is our Father; He is the source of all that we need, the supplier of all our needs, and we are His children.

But then you have – and there are other metaphors as well – but then you have this metaphor of a race, and we are runners in that race. We are athletes competing. That also appears on 2 Timothy chapter 2, where it talks about the athlete who does whatever is necessary to win the prize. The picture there is of an athlete engaged in a race, doing all he can to win the race.

Perhaps the most familiar New Testament text that addresses that is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 26, "Therefore I run in such a way as not without aim." And then he goes on to say, as I pointed out, "I box in such a way as not beating the air." "I run in such a way as not without aim." It is not aimless running, like jogging. When I was in my school days, both in junior high, high school, and my college days, I was, among other things, a runner, and I ran. And I never ran unless there was a finish line and a potential reason for running. It's hard for me to understand people who run, go nowhere, accomplishing nothing. Maybe, the worst of it, on a treadmill. Paul says, "I don't run that way; I don't run aimlessly." The implication is I run to win. I run to accomplish the goal that is set before me.

This obviously goes with running. We all understand the interest that the ancient world, particularly the Greek world, had in athletics and in games. In Galatians 5, Paul uses that metaphor. He says to the Galatians, "You were running well. Who hindered you?" You were running well. Who hindered you?

Philippians also, chapter 2, this picture of running appears again. In verse 16, Paul says that he's been faithful, and he wants the Philippians to be faithful, to appear as lights in the world, "holding fast the Word of life so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I didn't run in vain nor toil in vain." Paul couldn't comprehend an aimless race, running with no purpose in view, no goal, no victory, no triumph, no reward.

Again, in Philippians chapter 3 and in verse 13, "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on" – I pursue; I run – "toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul was highly motivated to run his spiritual race with a goal in mind. And there he tells us what the goal is. It is the prize of the upward call in Christ Jesus. He says in 2 Timothy 4:7 again, "I have finished the course." I don't run aimlessly; I run to win; I run to finish; I run for the prize which is the upward call and Christlikeness.

So, that particular metaphor appears a number of times, particularly in the writings of the apostle Paul. But here, as we look at Hebrews, the writer of Hebrews encourages all His readers to run this race. The Christian life is a race.

Now, I want to break this passage down a little bit because it's very practical. We're not going to find all kinds of profound theological things here, but some very helpful practical elements.

First of all, let's talk about the event - the event. In verse 1, just draw out this aspect, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." "Let us" – he says that many times in this letter – "Let us." If you go back to chapter 4, for example, you probably see it four or five or even six times as he encourages people, "Let us, let us, let us." Come into chapter 10, "Let us draw near." This is an indication that the Holy Spirit is speaking through Paul to this community of believers – of Jewish believers. Some of them were genuinely regenerated. Some of them were genuinely born again. And this would be a call to them to be faithful in the race, and to run with all their might, and to run with endurance. Some of them, as you remember, are intellectually convinced about the gospel but haven't really even entered the race.

But he's talking in general to the community of people who have at least outwardly identified with Jesus Christ, who constitute a church, and he's encouraging them who have not yet entered the race to get in the race, and those who are in the race to run with all their might.

As we have been saying all along, this great epistle is written primarily to believers. And we all need that exhortation to stay in the race and to run it with all our might and all our strength. So, there is that element of it. But there's also the encouragement bound up in the sort of general nature of "let us" to those who were intellectually convinced but had not come all the way to Christ. It's time now to get into the race; it's time now to run the race.

The Christian life is a race. It is a race. That is to say it demands great effort. It is not a sprint; it is not a middle distance; it is a marathon. The entrance to the race is the new birth: salvation by faith in the perfect and complete work of Christ. And apart from faith in Christ, you're not even in the race; you're on the sideline.

The race starts for you when you become a believer. But once you become a believer, you must be continually urged - and Paul does that, as we've pointed out a number of times - to run with all your might, not to jog, not to walk, not to sit down and rest, not to fall back. The Holy Spirit is calling us to run. Certainly, we could understand that. In our own Christian experiences, there are times when we seem to have slowed down to a veritable crawl. Some of us are even, at times, falling victim to temptation, going backwards.

The Christian life, then, is not a trot; it is not a morning jog; it is a race. The word "race" - an important word - *agōna*. Do you know an English word that sounds like that? "Agony." Agony. It is not a sprint; it is not a dash. As I said, it is a marathon. It is a faith race. There is a very obvious element behind being a good runner, and that is training, self-discipline, following whatever rigid standards are going to yield the most effective race. It's very challenging to be an enduring runner.

When we're talking about running a race, the assumptions here is that the runner does whatever he needs to do to be in the shape that he needs to be in to endure the race to the very end. It will demand every ounce of energy, and it will demand discipline and training if you're going to run to really win.

Amos said, “Woe to them that are at ease” – Amos 6:1. Woe to them that are at ease. This is a race; there’s no place for standing still or walking slowly. This is a race. And it is agony. It is an agonizing, relentless event. It is lifelong, and it is to be run with endurance. Let me just make a comment about that; that’s hupomonē, which means to be under and to remain there. Hupo is under, monē from the verb menō to remain. It is to remain under the challenge, to remain under the difficulty, to remain under the struggle. There will be obstacles; there will be problems. We will be weary and tired, distracted, but we remain under this challenge. We take it as God gives it to us and stay in the place where he’s put us, enduring whatever might come our way. So, this is really the key word. It’s the word “endurance.”

You know, the apostle Paul says to the Ephesians, “Having done all to stand.” And I think about that verse a lot. There are people that I know who’ve done all, but at the end of the race, they’re not standing. They’ve crashed and burned somewhere along the line. They had no hupomonē; they didn’t remain faithful under the challenge and the obligation to run the race.

I want to come to the end of my life having endured faithfully in the race, never have broken the rules, never have violated the calling, but running with endurance. That’s the imagery also in 2 Timothy chapter 2. The athlete does whatever he has to do to discipline himself to gain the prize, to win the prize.

So, that’s the event, and that’s how we must view the Christian life. It is not floating along. I started reading again this week J. C. Ryle’s book on holiness and just going through it again, which is always a wonderful experience for one’s soul. And what prompted that book was the – in his era, the nineteenth century – what prompted that book was the growing influence of the Keswick Movement in England which was the “let go and let God” movement. You just kind of sit down, and God takes over, and you don’t do anything. This was the – well, this gave birth to what we know as the Quaker Movement. This was what’s called “quietism,” let go and let God, just relax and let his power take over your life.

Well, that rankled J. C. Ryle to the bone, I promise you, because he viewed the Christian life in a biblical way. It was a warfare; it was a boxing match; it was a wrestling match; it was an agonizing race. And he wrote the book on holiness to shut down that false kind of idea that

you are to relax and somehow let God do everything for you. So, it is a race. That's the event, and we're in it for life.

Secondly, the encouragement. The encouragement. What is encouragement? "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us..." This is the encouragement to run the race, because of this cloud of witnesses. Now please get out of your mind that imagery of a stadium and all these people sitting up there cheering you on. That's not the point.

What is this "cloud of witnesses?" We just met them in chapter 11. That's who we've just seen. And to what do they give witness? To what do they all give testimony? To the value of what kind of life? A life of faith. They are not witnesses of us; they are witnesses to the power of faith, to the wisdom of faith, to the righteousness of faith, to the blessing of faith. They are witnesses to the life of faith. Whether it is Abel; or Enoch; or Noah; or Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses; or the rest that are referred to without giving their names, with the exception of some - Rahab and those listed in verse 32 - they are those who are this great cloud of witnesses who have given testimony to the great power and blessing of a life of faith.

Since we have so great a cloud of witnesses to the power of faith, let's run the same faith race. All that *nephelē* - that cloud, that mass, that body of witnesses - testify to the greatness of the life of faith. The results are worth it; that's what they tell us. The results are worth it. For Abel, they were worth it. To Enoch, they were worth it because he walked one day and walked into the presence of God. For Noah, his faith caused him to escape the flood. And for Abraham, his faith led him to a covenant with God and a full promise yet even now still to be fulfilled in the future, but his life was blessed, and the promise of a son was fulfilled.

And so, all of them experienced the blessing and the hope of promise in the life of faith. They didn't receive the fulfillment of it, as we know at the end of the chapter; they gained approval through their faith but didn't receive, verse 39 says, what was promised. But they showed, even though they hadn't received the full fulfillment of the promise the blessedness of living a life of faith. They are witnesses to the greatness, the validity, the blessing of faith.

Verse 15 of Philippians 2, “Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the Word of life.”

You need to be that kind of person, Paul says, so that his race was not in vain. He ran for your sake. So, he isn't in Hebrews 11, but it's a very paralleled principle. He ran a faith race to show you how to run a faith race. Make his run what he wanted it to be by being faithful to run yourself. If the athlete endures what he endures to run to win a corruptible crown, how much more should we discipline ourselves to receive an incorruptible crown? Setting aside the indulgences of the flesh, maintaining the training rules that God has laid down for us, exercising temperance, we run the race and our examples, our models are all who have gone before us and run the race of faith. We draw encouragement from them. And even though they didn't receive the promise in their day, the promise was fulfilled in Christ. In His death and resurrection, all that they had hoped for was to be realized, and they now have entered into the fullness of that realization. And so, the faith that they exercised, though not fulfilled in their life, as been fulfilled through the coming of Christ, and we know that. So, we know the full measure of the value of a life of faith.

We, in ourselves, are frail. We are weak, and yet we belong to a mighty company of runners in the race of faith. And they all are winners, and so will we be. For the God of yesterday is the God of today. “He's the same yesterday, today, and forever” – Hebrews 13:8.

There's another element here besides the event and the encouragement, and that's the encumbrances. In verse 1 again, “Let us also lay aside every encumbrance” – every encumbrance – “and the sin which so easily entangles us.” Now, in order to run effectively, you've got to get rid of useless weight. I remember years ago, in one of the Olympics, I was watching the sprinting events, and the world's leading sprinter lost. And the commentator said afterwards he had lost because he had put on so much weight. Nobody runs a race in an overcoat. You put weights on for training. You may wrap weights around your – even your ankles in training, but you take them off when you get in the race. Travel light. Do some discarding.

It reminds me of 1 Peter 2:1 where Peter says, “Strip off your soiled, polluted garments.” Get down to the bare basics to run the race. Certain things need to be eliminated if you're going

to run a faith race effectively. Number one, every encumbrance of every weight, as the authorized put it, it's the Greek word *ogkon*. It simply means bulk. Bulk. It could be a mass of anything. It could be the weights that you're carrying. It could be superfluous flesh. You need to get rid of anything that slows you down in the race. A runner starts with a reduction of all the excess body weight, getting himself down where he has as close to zero fat as possible, and then works to make himself nothing but a muscle machine. And he trains to make sure he stays that way. In the race he takes off his baggy warm-up suit, gets down to the minimum so that he is able to run. No encumbrance at all.

Now, what is he talking about here? What is he referring to with this weight, this encumbrance? Well, first of all, it's not sin, because he refers to sin also. "Lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us." These are two things that slow you down. These are two things that entangle you, that encumber you.

First, the weight; and second, the sin. Well, if the weight isn't sin, what is it? Well, the scripture doesn't tell us here, but I think it's obvious what it is. What was dragging down these Jewish believers in this new community, this new church? What was holding them back? What was dragging them down? What baggage were they still carrying around? Simple answer – what was it? – it was the baggage of their former Judaistic legalism. They were running, I guess you could say, like overweight people in bulky sweatshirts. They were going to collapse in a pile of legalistic sweat. You can't run the race dragging along everything from the past.

The biggest weight encumbering these new believers: pounds and pounds and pounds of Jewish legalism, rabbinic tradition, dead works, dead weight. And it wasn't easy to let it go; it was engrained in them - Sabbath observances, for example. That's why in Colossians 2, Paul says, "Don't let anybody hold you to a Sabbath or a new moon or a feast day or a festival." That's shadow, and shadow goes away when substance arrives. He says the same thing to them in Galatians, "Having begun in the Spirit, do you think now that you can hold onto all this past stuff and somehow, having begun in the Spirit, you're going to be made perfect by the flesh?" It's impossible.

They were holding onto the temple. They were holding onto the priests. They were holding onto the rituals; they were holding onto the ceremonies. That's why all through this letter, the

writer says, “There is a better priesthood” – right? – “and a better sacrifice, and even a better temple and a better covenant.” And in chapter 6, he says, “Let’s go on, leave these things behind.” Even at the end of chapter 5, they say the same thing. You can never run by faith if you’re hanging onto work or any of the trappings of a works system. The race is run by faith plus nothing, and anything you hang onto from past religion that is made up of pointless ceremonies, and traditions, and rituals, and rules will only slow you down. He’s saying, “Unload your Judaism; unload your legalism; drop all the old weights and the sin which so easily entangles us.”

We heard some testimonies tonight in baptism. One testimony from Patricia who said that she was raised a Catholic. We all know that many people in our church, who came from Catholicism – how many of you are former Catholics? Put your hands up. Yeah, a lot of people. One of the things you had to face when you left Catholicism was the temptation to hang onto it, right? To hang onto attitudes toward Mary, to hang onto attitudes toward the mass, to hang onto attitudes toward works, to hang onto fears that you had that if you violated Catholic law and the Catholic Church, you might commit a mortal sin and end up in hell. And that’s not an easy thing to let go of when it’s engrained in you.

Some of you came out of Seventh Day Adventism, and it’s hard for you to let go of some of the dietary restrictions and restraints. Some of you came out of Mormonism, and there are things that hold onto you and still have a grip on you. Those are encumbrances that slow down the faith race because all of those are components of a works systems.

And then, in addition to that, sin, which so easily entangles us. Both of them entangle us. Literally *periistēmi*, the root is to surround us, to gather around us and inhibit us. It’s like trying to run when you’re surrounded, and there’s all kinds of things in your way. The reference is not to some specific sin, but to face the fact that sin itself surrounds us, closes in on us, and restricts us in our race. Sin is an ever-present threat to hinder our running.

Religion threatens us – the religions of works from the past and sin - whatever sin it is, whatever forms of sin it is. And you heard that again in the testimonies tonight. You heard the young man giving his testimony and saying it’s not that he is now void of temptation; it’s still a struggle. He is still surrounded by the reality of his flesh and his fallenness, and so are we all.

It's a very challenging thing to run the race. It's tough enough to fight sin without having to fight all of the dead weight of a former religion of work. So, the weight is legalism. Sin, at its heart, is always unbelief. So, in a sense, you could sum up the sin as unbelief. You always engage in an act of unbelief when you sin. We all do. Whenever we sin, we believe we will get gratification in a way that God says we won't. So, when we sin, we are saying, "I don't believe you, God. This is what I want; this is what I will do; I reject what you say about it. All sin then is an act of practical unbelief. Because, honestly, we want the best for ourselves. It's part of our nature to want to indulge ourselves and want to have joy and peace and all of that. And when you sin, you assume you'll find it there, when God says you won't. So, you believe the lie rather than the Word of God so that all sin is, in the end, a form of unbelief.

Now, if you're going to try to run a faith race, unbelief or failure to believe God is going to hinder you, so is hanging onto any kind of works.

There's a third thing I want you to look at – or a fourth: the event, the encouragement, the encumbrances, then the example – the example. We've had a lot of witnesses to the validity of a faithful life. But there's one example that rises above all the rest, verse 2, "Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The course has been set. The weights and obstructions stripped off. The race is underway. We have the encouragement of others who've run before us, mortal men who lived by faith triumphantly. But beyond all that, there is one example to whom we look – looking unto Jesus. Second Timothy 2:8, Paul says there, after having given the picture of a soldier, and an athlete, and a farmer, and even a teacher, trying to encourage Timothy to get his act together, to run the race, to be a faithful soldier, to make all the ultimate sacrifices, he says, "Remember Jesus Christ." Remember Jesus Christ. Literally the Greek says look away to Jesus. Get your eyes off the immediate surrounding; look away to Jesus. Lift your eyes to heaven. Second Corinthians 3:18, "Gaze on His glory and be transformed into His image from one level of glory to the next."

And those of you who have run competitively know that you have to keep your eyes ahead of you. You can't run effectively looking at your feet. Right? Looking at your feet, you will

stumble and fall. Where you put your eyes is absolutely critical. A few times I ran the hurdles, and the first thing I learned about the hurdles was you never look at a hurdle, because as soon as you look at a hurdle, you're in it, under it; it's all over you. You never look at a hurdle; you look way above the hurdle.

And that's what our writer is telling us, "You know, you're in a race; keep your eyes off the ground, off your feet, off your surroundings." Where do we put our eyes? We put our eyes on Christ. This is back to Philippians 3, "We set our eyes on the goal who is Christ." Why do we want to look at Him? Because He's the perfect example. He's the perfect model. You don't look at the people around you and say, "Eh, I'm a lot faster than Joe here. I'm an awful lot faster than Alice over here." You put your eyes on Jesus, and He's the model. Why? Because He is the author – archēgos – the author. He is the reason we have faith, isn't it true? He gave us that as a gift. He is the leader. He is the originator. He is the author. He is the one who granted us faith out of His store. And He, too, has faith, as exhibited in His attitude toward His Father.

Back in verse 6 of Hebrews 11, it says, "Without faith it is impossible to" – do what? – "please God." Without faith, it is impossible to please God. You can't please God without believing Him. And what did the Father say about Jesus? Mark 1, verse 11, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." God was pleased with Christ because He always believed His Father. That's why He never sinned. "I do what the Father says. I do what the Father shows me to do. I do what the Father does."

In His temptation, how did He respond to every temptation that Satan through at Him, those three in a row? He always quoted Scripture and affirmed His trust in His Father. "I will believe My Father. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." He took everything that God His Father ever said and put His complete trust in that. And His faith was so strong that He even sustained joy as He looked at the cross and its shame. He saw through that to the end. What was the end? Being seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Did He want to go to the cross? Well, from a human viewpoint, He said, "Father, let this cup pass from me." Did he trust His Father to take Him through the cross and out the other side? Absolutely. Did He trust that the shame would only be temporary only for a little while on

Earth, culminating in His horrible death on the cross? Absolutely. He believed God would take Him through that cross, out the other side of the grave, and set Him at His right hand in heaven.

That's faith. That's faith that faced a crisis the likes of which no human being has ever faced except Him. That's how great His faith was. To become alienated from God, to bear all the sins of all the people throughout human history who would ever believe, and yet to emerge triumphant.

He is the author, but he's also not only the archēgos, the prototype of faith, He is the teleiōtēs; He carries faith to its completion. He carries faith to its completion. He is the perfect illustration of faith. Perfect faith, front to back, trusted God totally in everything. He raised faith to its perfection and established the highest example of faith. He is the source then of faith, and He models it, and He is the epitome of faith as an example of believing God in crisis that we can't even imagine.

So, the event, the encouragement, the encumbrances, and the example. We keep our eyes on Him. And then the end. Like Him, He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Where did He find His joy in running such a difficult faith race? He believed God. He believed God; He never wavered. He was faithful to God's Word. He pleased God, and without faith it's impossible to please Him. He was perfect in His faith. Why? Why would He endure the shame, endure the cross, and have, at the same time, joy? Because He saw past that to the goal of being seated at the right-hand of the throne of God. Do I need to remind you that there's a seat there for us on His throne with Him as well? He is the model of faith because He sees past the horrendous persecution, the horrendous suffering – far worse than any of us would endure.

And even the Hebrew readers, verse 3, he says to them, "Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Verse 4, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin." It hasn't cost you your life like it did Him. And He saw through to the very end. His joy in the race was that He could see through the suffering, through the agony, through the shame to the reign on the right-hand of the Father.

I love what it says in John 15:11. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be made full.” We share in the same joy because one day we will also sit on the right-hand of the Father, enthroned with Jesus as joint heirs with Him. Future reward, Paul says he was laid hold of by Christ for the prize which was to be like Christ, and it is to that that he presses. And even in the struggle there is joy because – and here’s the key – the victory is already guaranteed. Right? We win the race.

“God always causes us to triumph in Christ,” Paul said to the Corinthians. “We will receive a crown of life, a crown of rejoicing. We will be rewarded in eternity.” And so, the exhortation, then, for us to run the race is a full and rich exhortation. And when we get our eyes on Jesus and the ultimate goal, it is easier to make all the necessary sacrifices to gain that final eternal reward.