

Hebrews 12:1-2

“The Christian Life in Miniature”

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Pr Josh Anderson

3rd Sunday before Easter

When I was a student at Covenant Seminary in the mid 2000s, I had the opportunity to take my church history courses with a remarkable scholar and churchman named David Calhoun. Dr. Calhoun has gone to be with the Lord now, but it was a privilege to sit under his teaching, and later, after I graduated and was ordained as a pastor, I got to know him even better when I worked for him for a time as a teaching assistant.

By way of aside, you should know that the audio of all of Dr. Calhoun’s lectures, covering the whole scope of church history from the early church to the 20th century are available for free on Covenant Seminary’s website, and I would highly recommend them to you.

I remember many wonderful things from Dr. Calhoun’s teaching - his gentleness, his gratitude for the universal church - that is, not just the reformed branch, but all the church, his matchless knowledge of the many events and personalities of church history, and many others - but one of the things I remember above all (and this points to the formative power of ritual and liturgy in all our lives) is how Dr. Calhoun would conclude almost every single one of his lectures.

He would come to the end of a lecture on Augustine or Aquinas or Cramner or Calvin, and his last words would be these. He would say:
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, 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.

Though he never explained it explicitly, what Dr. Calhoun wanted us to see and understand of course is that what we call “church history” is merely the continuation of the history of God’s people that Hebrews 11 begins to record, and of course Hebrews 11 begins with the story of Abel, at the very dawn of time.

And, as Dr. Calhoun rightly shaped us to remember, to be part of this great story of God’s people from the very beginning of time, to be a member of the living communion of saints who have gone before us means that we must now take up our cross and run also with endurance the race that is before us.

And that is the great calling that Hebrews 12:1-2, our sermon text this morning, intends to describe for us. Listen carefully now to Hebrews 12:1-2. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

1 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.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

All of God's word is infinitely valuable, of course.

But there are some passages which so concisely and beautifully summarize the ways of God and the calling of our lives as Christians that we would be remiss if we did not ponder them especially deeply and even commit them to our memory so that we can recall them again and again and again.

This, I would argue, is one of those passages.

Indeed, in this passage, The Apostle describes the fullness of the Christian life in miniature form. In two short verses, it is all laid out for us - what we are to do as believers, and how, by God's grace and mercy, we are made able to do it.

In verse one, we have the Call of the Christian life. And in verse two, the Promise of the Christian life. The Call and the Promise. So let's take them in turn.

First, the call. In verse 1, the apostle writes: *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.*

This, then, is the fundamental call of the Christian life. It is, in the Apostle's wonderful metaphor, to run the race with endurance.

The older I get, the more I understand — not just intellectually, but in my soul, in my bones, this poetic but deeply true description of the Christian life as a kind of race that we must run with endurance.

Indeed, friends - the race we run in our lives as we follow Jesus into all the difficult and wonderful places he takes us is not a sprint. It is a marathon.

Our race begins the day of our birth and continues until the day we die - remember, Paul explicitly compares his imminent death to reaching the finish line of his life's race in our Epistle reading this morning, writing in 2 Timothy 4: *"The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."*

The course and the terrain for our race as we follow Jesus is not, of course, up to us. It is laid out for us by someone higher and more loving and more powerful than us - by the hand of God himself.

There will be times when we'll run on flat and level ground, when it won't feel overly hard, and there will be times when we run downhill and it feels like it doesn't take any effort at all to reach great speeds, but of course, much of the course, far more than we would like, will be uphill, and it is these uphill portions that will take everything from us to run faithfully.

And this is where the endurance part comes in.

There will be times in this race when it feels like it takes everything we possess to just keep going, to just keep putting one foot in front of the other, times when the hill we're climbing seems unending, and perhaps insurmountable.

And friends, let's be honest - this uphill climb is how the race feels for a great deal of our lives. This really is what life is often like in our fallen world.

In the last week alone, I have had at least 15 different extended conversations on the phone or in person with people in this room about all sorts of suffering, all sorts of difficulty - physical sickness and pain; marital difficulty; depression; grief, financial challenges; vocational challenges - all these things and more.

Everyone's race is challenging. There are no exceptions. There is no other way, as Jesus sought to make abundantly clear again and again, to follow our savior and his way of the cross.

So what do we do as we run that we might have endurance? In verse 1, the apostle points out two things.

First, he says *"let us lay aside every weight."*

While the apostle isn't specific here as to what might constitute the type of weight we might need to lay aside in order to run the race with endurance, I think we can be confident that he is speaking here of all the things we can look to in this life that distract us from our primary calling - which is to follow Jesus and to, at the end, finish the race he is leading us on.

There are so many things in this world that vie for our attention, that seek our heart's affection. And it is so easy to fixate on them, to be drawn to their siren song.

Possessions that seem to offer happiness, wealth that seems to offer security, physical appearance that seems to offer contentment, honor and success as the world defines honor and success, fulfillment in our work that seems to offer our life meaning, experiencing what we deem to be the appropriate amount of recognition and appreciation from others for all our hard work, having our relational needs met as we define them, etc, etc.

Beloved, let me be clear with you. None of those things are bad in themselves, necessarily. But none of those things — not one of them — are promised to you by Jesus Christ.

And none of those things, though good, matter a whit in comparison to your true and fundamental calling in this life - to run the race that is set before you with endurance so that you might receive the only prize that matters at all - the crown of righteousness which the Lord Jesus, the righteous judge, will award on the last day to all those who persevere in their love for him.

That's it. Running the race with endurance. That's all that matters. Nothing else even comes close.

And friends, if you are not clear in your mind and heart on this point — if you continue to believe that the race is important, but you know, these other things are pretty significant, too — then you will be weighed down, and your endurance will be in danger.

Remember the words of the apostle Paul - *"But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

One thing I do - Paul says - One thing.

Or, as our Lord Jesus puts it when he looks his disciples in the eyes and says: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

To be pure of heart doesn't mean to be childish or sinless - it means to be focused, for your heart to be undivided, for your heart to will one thing above all others.

And the Apostle adds another description of how we might run with endurance - he says we must lay aside also *"the sin which clings so closely."*

Friend, I won't belabor this point, but for the love of crown of righteousness that awaits you at the end of this race, don't play nice with sin.

If there is sin in your life that haunts you, put it to death.

And don't put it to death tomorrow, or next week or next month. Do it today. As the psalmist tells us: *Today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart.*

And don't try to do this work alone. Confess your sin out loud to someone else. Come and meet with me and let's talk about it. Find a trusted friend and put your sin on the table.

Friends, placating our sin, nurturing our sin, failing to repent of our sin is the primary way that we make running this race far harder than it needs to be.

Put your sin to death today, and run the race before you unencumbered by its weight and burden.

Verse 1 is the call of the Christian life. It is a high calling. It is a difficult calling. The apostle pulls no punches. He lays the truth for us to see it. There are martyrs in that great cloud of witness. There are men and women who have suffered much - far more than we have or will.

And our calling is to follow in their way, following Jesus as they did, laying aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, so that we also might run with endurance the race that is set before us.

But if verse 1 of our passage this morning is the call of the Christian life, then verse 2 is the promise.

Verse 2 unlocks the answer to the question of how it is that we can possibly do this, how it is that we can possibly endure and run this race to the end with all the endurance it requires.

How do we run this race? We run it with the certain help of the promise of the living God. As the apostle writes, we run it by *"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 only way we can run this race with endurance - the only way we can lay aside every weight and put to death the sin which clings so closely is by looking to Jesus, by keeping our eyes focused on our Lord in his beauty and strength, by holding before our eyes his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension to his father's right hand.

And this verse of course includes this remarkable precious promise given to us by God, which is that Jesus is not only the author of our faith, he is also its perfecter.

In other words, Jesus is the beginning of our faith, and he is the one who will bring our faith to completion.

Jesus is the initiator *and* the finisher of all that God is doing in us, every single day of our lives, every single stride of this race we are running.

Jesus is the foundation *and* the capstone of our life story, which is lived always *in him*, in and with and through the one who holds all things together, including the very faith that we cling to in our most difficult hours.

Friends, this promise that Jesus is both the author and the perfecter of our faith means that we never run this race alone.

No, we run always in union with Jesus - in union with the one who has gone before us, the one who has not only blazed the trail of the upward call to God, but also runs that race with us and will bring us, at last, to the end, to the finish line, to the crown of righteousness that we will receive from his hand.

This is such glad tidings, such good news - for it means that our real hope is that the one who began a good work in us, the one who started us on this race in the first place, will also bring that work to completion.

For our race is bound up in the one who has conquered, the one who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross and despised its shame and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

In 2 Timothy 4, after Paul talks about fighting the good fight and finishing the race, he closes his letter to Timothy with these words.

And you can tell here that Paul is clinging to this promise, even as he knows that the end of his race is coming. He says in his last will and testament: *"The Lord [Jesus] will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."*

Beloved, that promise is what Paul put his hope in. That is what clung to. That Jesus would rescue him from every evil deed — all his own sins and all the sins that had been committed against him as well — and bring him safely into his kingdom at the last.

And that is our hope as well.

Friends, as we close this morning, I want to make two points of application from this passage.

The first is simply this.

When I read the call of the Christian life in this passage, and I see your lives, from the unique vantage point I have as your pastor, I just want to say - beloved, keep doing what you're doing. Just keep doing it.

Don't lose heart. Don't give up. Let's keep following Jesus together.

Because I see you running this race. I see you seeking to lay aside those things which distract you and weigh you down. I see you seeking to repent and put your sin to death so that it won't encumber you.

I want you to know that, as your pastor, as someone who knows you with a fairly substantial level of intimacy, that I have some idea of what it is costing you to follow Jesus, and it is so encouraging to me to see you continuing to run this race, no matter what it costs.

To see men and women and children pressing forward and seeking the upward call of God in Jesus Christ, to see us together pressing forward for that crown of righteousness - it is a glorious thing. It is beautiful. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. And that glorious, beautiful work is happening here in this church, in the lives represented in this room.

The second thing I want to say is this.

Don't ever forget. Don't ever forget that in all these things, in every step of the race you are running in your life that Jesus is with you.

Jesus is with you. He is with you in your waking and in your sleeping. Jesus is with you in your weeping and in your repenting and in your laughter and in your confusion. Cling to that promise, beloved.

For you are never alone. Jesus is the author *and* the perfecter of your faith. It is literally impossible for you to have an experience in this life that Jesus is not with you in.

But remember, the Jesus who is with you not only suffered. He also triumphed. He also finished his race. He won - he crossed the finish line with victory and glory.

And Jesus' triumph, his resurrection, his ascension, his indestructible life is the basis of the hope you have for your own triumph, for your own victory, so that one day you will also be able to say with Paul:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.