

## Resolved, to Keep Our Eyes on Jesus, Part 1 Hebrews 12:1-3

### I. Introduction

This is the first Sunday of the new year. Actually this is the first Sunday of a new decade. Perhaps you are like me and thinking, “Where did 2009 go?” Even more, “Where did the past decade go?” It seemed like yesterday when people were predicting the end of the digital age and a technological meltdown with Y2K.

This time of the year draws out of us **a passion for renewal**. Even the cycles of creation beckon the new life that comes with the season of Spring. It is now that **motivation** is highest, **ambition** is strongest, and **resolutions** are made in order to knock out the debt, trim down the extra pounds you gained, obtain better financial stability with gainful employment, and so on. Unfortunately however, three months later many of us have become weary and overwhelmed to the point that such lofty ambitions and sincere resolutions become a thing of the past—a testament to good intentions never realized. Just the other day I read the statistics which stated that of all the people who make New Year’s resolutions, only 8% will have kept them by the end of the year!

The Bible symbolizes the Christian life in various ways. Psalm 1 depicts the Christian like a flourishing tree by the water, always bearing fruit. Ephesians 6 illustrates the Christian life like a soldier dressed for battle. In John 15, Jesus refers to us as branches on the vine. Elsewhere, we are lights of the world, salt of the earth, ambassadors of Christ, farmers in the harvest, and sheep in the pasture of our Good Shepherd. But perhaps the most popular imagery of the Christian life is that of **the athlete in the race**. It can be argued that it was Paul’s favorite picture of the Christian life. And the writer of Hebrews also picks up on this imagery after giving the picture gallery of the heroes of our faith in chapter 11. Beginning with Hebrews 12:1, we read the following:

<sup>1</sup> Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.  
Hebrews 12:1-3

This morning, I want to draw your attention to the race that is set before us, especially in light of the new year. If you believe in Christ, the Bible says you are in a race. It is not a race for the undisciplined or the faint of heart. It is not the sprinter whose strength fizzles out after 100 yards; it is a race that **calls for the endurance and strength of a marathon runner**.

There are certain things that are presupposed when you are a runner. **First**, it assumes some measure of discipline to be such an athlete. You don't become a seasoned runner overnight. In fact, if you are out of shape, it may take several weeks or months of training before you can get to the point of running. Running demands a great deal of energy, commitment, and discipline—and the further and harder you run, the more these will be required of you.

Notice **secondly**, that such a race is not for walkers or even joggers. **It is for runners.** The Christian life is not for spectators who are entertained by the race of other Christians. No one is exempt from running. We are all in the race. Therefore, **the question is not IF you run but HOW you run.**

The answer as to how you should run is found in 1 Corinthians 9, written by a man who ran with relentless passion, determination, and discipline. Beginning with verse 24, listen to what Paul says about running:

<sup>24</sup> Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? **Run in such a way that you may obtain it.** <sup>25</sup> And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, **but we** for an imperishable crown. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I run thus: **not with uncertainty.** Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

This passage answers the **third** aspect of the race, namely how should we run? Answer: **“Run in such a way that may obtain it.”** In other words, run for the purpose of winning the prize. There is a manner of running that belongs exclusively to champions, but **this manner should be the mode of all Christians.** There isn't a race for a certain class of Christians who just want to be in the race but don't want to win the prize and another class of Christians who have champion-like training! Casual training and slothful exercise is not optional. If you are not running in order to win the prize, then why are you in the race? If you aren't seeking the reward, why endure? Paul is saying, “Go hard or go home.” Or in the words of Jesus, “Take up your cross and follow me or don't pretend to be one of my followers.”

This a radical call for the Christian life, especially when we live in a land where it is acceptable for Christians to be walkers, joggers, or even spectators! **This picture of the Christian life is laced with holy ambition and consuming passion.** God wants you to view your race with the kind of ambition that an Olympic athlete has of winning the gold. Those who train for the gold are **“big getters,”** and God who is a “Big Giver” is looking for those who believe that He is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). He wants you to have the kind of passion to dedicate your life to not only running well, but also finishing strong. Because of the resurrection, God is calling you to not only be involved in “the work of the Lord,” but **steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord** (1 Cor. 15:58).

With that in mind, we must take into consideration our frailty and fickleness. We make promises that we cannot keep, resolutions that we do not fulfill, and our pronouncements this time of the year to some degree make hypocrites of us all. We become weary, distracted, and fainthearted and quit on our ambitions. As we launch into this new year, **how do we run the race before us in 2010 with endurance without becoming weary? How do we run with greater strides of strength and endurance and finish with no regrets?**

While I will get to this in greater detail in a moment, I want you to write this one thought down:

## **The way you run is determined by what you see.**

Is that not a little odd? Off all the parts of the body that demand exercise, development, and training, it is your eyes that are most important. From our text this morning, I want draw out two aspects of our running, namely (1) the **motivation** and (2) the **method** for running with endurance. God has abundantly provided us everything we need to run with endurance, in such a way as to win, and such provision is found in **the gospel of Jesus Christ**. Simply put, the race before us requires a gospel-driven endurance fueled by a relentless focus on Jesus Christ.

## **II. The Motivation to Run (v. 1a) – “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses”**

The apostle opens the scene of the race by drawing attention to the crowd—a great cloud of witnesses. Indeed, when you come to a race at a coliseum, the first thing you hear are the chants and chorus of the massive crowds, and entering the stadium the sheer volume of people is overwhelming.

I remember marching in our high school band when we had the privilege of playing in several stadiums, including New Orleans Superdome and Orange Bowl. But the most impressive stadium was at our arch-nemesis Auburn’s Jordan-Haire stadium. As we marched out to the center of the 50 yard line, I remember looking straight up, seeing row after row of some 92,000 people seemingly sitting over our heads. When the crowd chanting in unison, it literally shook your body.

This is the kind of picture the apostles depicts in “a great cloud”. But notice **WHO** is in this cloud. They are witnesses—specifically the witnesses found in the previous chapter. What you have in the cloud are not super fans or merely cheerleaders; what you have are **men and women who have run their races with the same kind of persevering faith you need in order to endure**.

There are **patriarchs** such as **Abraham** who went not knowing where he was going, looking for the city whose builder and maker was God. **Moses** considered the reproaches of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, looking to Him who is invisible.

There are **victors** who “subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.”

Then there are **martyrs** who “were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth*.”

All these comprise the cloud of witnesses, and their testimony was that the promises of God were of greater value than anything in this earth. In faith, they made much of God. They are witnesses, not in the sense of testifying as spectators of an event but as **participants in the race God has marked out for them, whether it be stopping the mouths of lions or being eaten by them in such coliseums.**

These witnesses believed the promises of God but did not see the fulfillment of them, though their eyes had been trained in faith on “**the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen**” (Heb. 11:1). Nevertheless, they completed their races with undying faith while displaying the immeasurable worth of having God. We know that in Christ, all the promises of God are “Yes” and “Amen,” and so if they could run not having the fulfillment of the promises of God, how much more should we who have Christ, the promised Messiah?!

**WHERE** do we find such a cloud of witnesses? We find them **in the Word of God**. Turn with me to Romans 15, and hear what Paul says about the purpose of the Scriptures. In verse four, he writes:

**4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus.**

Romans 15:4-5 (ESV)

The purpose of Scriptures (**WHY**) is that we might have endurance and encouragement. When we read about the persevering faith of saints, it should motivate us, instill endurance, and give us abiding hope in God. They all ran with champion-like faith, that is, in such a way as to win. **The standard of our running should not be mediocre or recreational. It should glorious and sacrificial!**

Notice that our God is the **God of endurance and encouragement**. Whatever endurance and encouragement we need or must have, it comes from Him. It is sourced and found in Him, and a primary means of providing such grace is through the Scriptures and reading what was “written in former days.”

### **[Application Points]**

This is why **reading through the Bible** is so important. To not read through the Bible is to deprive yourself from the very inspiration and means of endurance and encouragement you need to run the race this year! Reading through the Bible is not merely a discipline or challenge. Your running with endurance is contingent upon it!

On another point of application, let me encourage you to read about those in church history who ran the race well. Get *Foxe's Book of Martyr's* and read of the enduring faith of saints who gave their lives for Jesus' sake. Read missionary biographies whose faith in Jesus led them to sacrifice all for the sake of the kingdom and advance of the gospel. Nothing charges my batteries and inspires my faith (outside of the Bible) than reading the lives of those who are dead, yet continue to speak. They are martyrs with a voice for our generation, and we would be well-served in the Christian race should we listen to them!

### III. The Method of Training (v. 1b) – “let us lay aside every weight and the sin...”

Not only should we consider the motivation for running, but secondly we should evaluate our method for training. There are two specific aspects of training, both of them having the same call to cast off or lay aside. According to the text, we should lay aside every “weight” and “the sin” which entangles or ensnares us.

#### (A) Laying Aside Every Weight

It is interesting that the apostle talks about “weights” and “the sin”. What might be the weights he is talking about? As a runner, you run with the least amount of clothing possible to make you as light as possible. Weights are not necessarily sinful things, but they can have the same effect of sinful matters in that they inhibit your progress and function as hindrances to running your race with endurance.

A simple way of determining a weight in your life is this: **anything that hinders the progress of the gospel both in and through your life to conform you into greater Christ-likeness.** Weights function to distract you and blind you from looking to Jesus that is the practice of gospel-driven endurance. Weights are those things that you initially see in peripheral vision which eventually become your primary focus. They move from being on the periphery to occupying a place of centrality and priority in your life.

There are two places in particular in the New Testament that speaks of such weights.

[i] The first one is in Jesus’ parable of the soils. The soils represent the hearts and lives of those who hear the gospel. It should be our goal that our hearts be receptive and fertile ground for the gospel to flourish. Yet there is a seed that falls among thorny ground. Notice how Jesus interprets these “thorns”. In Luke 8:14 Jesus explains:

<sup>14</sup> Now the ones *that* fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are **choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life**, and bring no fruit to maturity.  
Luke 8:14

<sup>19</sup> and **the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.**  
Mark 4:19

Cares, riches, and pleasures of this life are the “thorns” that choke the life of the gospel seed so that it does not bear fruit. To use our illustration they are the weights that are carried around that prevent you from running the race. Jesus is saying that there are particular things that if you allow to take root in your heart will suck the nourishment of the gospel seed. In a similar way, when the cares of this world, the pleasures of life, and the desire for riches are given weight and significance in your life, you as a runner will be so weighed down that you will not be able to finish the race.

[ii] Consider also what Paul tells Timothy in **2 Timothy 2**. He is exhorting him to be strong in the grace in Jesus Christ—that is, be strengthened in the gospel. He then goes on to give this illustration about a good soldier of Jesus Christ, beginning in verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> No one engaged in warfare **entangles himself with the affairs of *this* life**, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

2 Tim. 2:3-4

Just like weights ensnaring the runner, being consumed with “the affairs of this life” is unacceptable behavior for a soldier actively engaged in warfare. The soldier who has been enlisted by his commanding officer has as his goal not to do anything that would detract from accomplishing that mission. What is that goal? To please his commanding officer or the one who enlisted him.

It is interesting that the world “entangle” in 2 Tim. 2:3 is almost identical to Heb 12:1’s “ensnare” which other translations use as “entangle” (NASV, NIV). Just like a soldier who is the midst of a battle does not entangle himself in “the affairs of this life,” so does the runner who is in the midst of a race weigh himself down with such weights.

The first set of weights in the parable of the sower/soils **addresses gospel growth**—life is choked out so that there is no abiding, enduring fruit. The second set of weights in 2 Timothy 2 **speaks of pleasing God and accomplishing the mission He has given to us**. The race set before us calls for endurance in both gospel growth—sanctification and holiness—as well as fulfilling God’s mission and call for our lives—to please Him and make Him known. In both cases, the weights are not explicitly or inherently sinful, but their effects on the runner are just as devastating.

### [Application]

Let’s get specific, shall we? What are some weights—matters that are not necessarily bad—that need to be cast aside?

Things become weights when **we add value, significance, and worth to them**. The weighty things in your life are what most freely come out of your mouth in conversation with other people. Weighty things are those that you give most time and attention to, where you spend your money. These things become weighty because they **grab your affections** and pull you down. They **capture your attention** that you are preoccupied with them.

I like what John Owen said about such weights. He writes, “*When we so embrace them so adhere unto them, as to take them into our minds and affections, they are a weight wherewith no man is able to run a Christian race. If when we are called to sufferings, the love of this world, and the things of it, with our lives in the enjoyment of them, be prevalent in us, we shall find them such a weight upon us as will utterly incapable of fulfilling our duty*” (*An Exposition of the Epistle of Hebrews*, 226).

Let me give you a **specific example**. For some of you, perhaps a big weight is what others think about you. This is especially true for young people, though not exclusively. You are concerned that running hard for Jesus means you will leave others behind. People's opinion of you has so much value that it weighs you down so that you cannot run the race. To lay this weight aside, you need to focus solely on what God's thinks about you, because after all, his opinion has eternal weight while your friends might change overnight.

What are some things that right now have considerable weight in your lives that are hindering you from running the Christian race with champion-like faith? Perhaps it is just "**stuff**." We in America have so much stuff that we have to rent extra garages on highways to house them all. This is the manifestation of covetous hearts. Maybe this year your effectiveness as a Christian would be enhanced if you went on a materialism fast where you refrained from getting the things you WANT to focus only on the things you need.

Whatever it is, we need to deal with the weights in our life. We need to come to the place like Paul who said in Acts 20:24, "**But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.**" Paul could finish his course that included beating, imprisonment, loneliness, and eventual martyrdom because there were no other weights in his life except the gospel. My life = no value. The things of the world = rubbish. Jesus = my treasure. This is the pre-race formula for successful running. Like Paul, we should be crucified with Christ so that we no longer live—and the things of this world no longer have any weight.

There are things the world can do that Christians can do; but there are things Christians can do **that the world cannot do**, such as preaching the gospel and advancing the kingdom of Christ in word and deed. That is why Jesus told a would-be disciple to "**let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God**" (Luke 9:60). This is what Jesus is talking about when speaking of worrying about food and clothing. Most of us would consider these things as basic necessities, but Jesus says they become "weights" when you are preoccupied all the time to the point that you are constantly worried and anxious about them. Instead, you should be seeking first the kingdom of God, displaying its "weight" and importance with your passion and priority for its progress.

This is why, when Jesus commissioned the Twelve to preach the kingdom is at hand, he told them to not weigh themselves down with extra tunics, staffs, or sandals, nor to take with them extra money belts or bags (Matt. 10:9-10). All these things would be a hindrance to the mission, and Jesus wanted them to run the race with the discipline and focus that He had shown them up to that point.

What had Jesus shown them to that point? **A life of weightlessness**. Jesus had been born in a feeding trough inside a cave, lived without the amenities of foxes and birds ("the Son of Man has no place to lay his head"), paid taxes with coins of out fishes mouths, rode in on a borrowed donkey, on the cross had the only thing he owned stripped off of him and cast as lots, and was buried in a borrowed tomb. Jesus did not put weight on the stuff, people's opinions, or anything in this world because He was consumed with pleasing His father and running the race set before Him and to come to the end with a scream, "It is finished!"

The whole emphasis of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 is that our lives should have been marked by the **weight of the gospel**, the weight of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection such that "if there is no resurrection, we of all men are to be most pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). One of the ways you know if you weighed down with the world or weighed down with the glory of God is to take inventory of your life by asking, "**If Jesus was not raised from the dead, would my life be any different? Would it not make sense to a watching world, or would it be business as usual?**"

The Christian community in Hebrews knew something of laying aside such weights. In chapter 10, we read of an account where some of the believers were imprisoned for their faith in Jesus Christ. Their race was being run behind bars. Look with me, picking up at Hebrews 10:32, what the apostle says about them:

<sup>32</sup> But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you **endured** a great struggle with sufferings: <sup>33</sup> partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while **you became companions of those who were so treated**; <sup>34</sup> for you had compassion on me in my chains, and **joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods**, knowing that you have a better and **an enduring possession** for yourselves in heaven. <sup>35</sup> Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you have need of **endurance**, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:

<sup>37</sup> "For yet a little while,

*And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.*

<sup>38</sup> Now the just shall live by faith;

**But if anyone draws back,**

*My soul has no pleasure in him.*

<sup>39</sup> But we are not of **those who draw back** to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

Hebrews 10:32-39

For some of them, the race set before them was behind bars. For others, the race included partnering with their fellow brothers and sisters who were imprisoned. What was the consequence of their actions? They lost all their worldly goods. But notice what their attitude was when all this was taking place. They JOYFULLY accepted it. **How can you joyfully accept the loss of all your worldly possessions if they carry a lot of weight in your life?** You can't! This was possible because they had considered the greater worth of faithfulness to Jesus and the "enduring possession" which was theirs in heaven.

Imagine if the story went something like this. Their fellow church members were imprisoned, and because of fear of what might happen to them, they shrunk back in isolation. Out of concern for losing everything they owned, they chose not to go to prison or have anything to do with them. Why? Because their self-preservation and the weight of the worldly goods mattered more to them to the point they would "draw back" and fail to run the race marked out before them.

The opposite of running with persevering faith is drawing back in fear and shame, and of those people God says He has no pleasure. Instead of joyfully "letting goods and kindred go," they became disqualified from the race by drawing back by the overwhelming weight of the world.

## [Conclusion]

Ultimately, **here is the fundamental issue** with weights as it relates to the race. They cause you to fix your eyes on yourself, your circumstances, and the prize of this world rather than looking to Jesus and the prize of heaven. Our lives are filled with attractions that become distractions from the race. When the race gets hard and you become weary, the things that have become weighty to you will do everything they can to drag you off the course and cause you to quit.

That is exactly **what the devil wants from you**. If he can get your eyes on anything other than Jesus, he knows that he will have you ineffective for the kingdom of God. If he can convince you that just being in the race is all that matters, and that you should not run with such passion and ambition so as to win, then he will add you to those whose lives have no significance for eternity. If in your daily life in 2010, he can blind you from the glory of making Christ known and beholding Jesus as seen in the gospel, then he will be happy to have you busy doing other religious things. He wants you to not take seriously the call to endure. He does not want you to be a maximalist for Jesus. That word “every” weight. God does not mean every, does He? If he can turn you to a minimalist, a coaster, a spiritual piggy-backer running on the legs of another, then he’s got you beat. Don’t become a sucker to the schemes of the enemy who will put every weight in your path to take your eyes off Jesus!

As we start this new year off as Christians, we need to remember those who surround us, how they ran, what it cost them, what their lives tell us, and be encouraged by them. We also need to ask ourselves what is keeping us from having a holy ambition and running the Christian race so as to win. What weights need to be laid aside? A busy schedule such that God is marginalized? A budget staked down in earthly pleasures such that God is given the leftovers financially? **Is there anything that is dominating you more than Jesus?**

As you examine your life, is there anything right now that is hindering your, sidelining you, or distracting you from living aggressively for the kingdom of God? Whatever it is, that weight needs to be laid aside. You are going to have enough challenges and trials on your race—don’t add any to them with self-inflicted burdens and weights. Don’t be like me as a 6<sup>th</sup> grader going to youth camp packing dumbbells in my suitcase because I turned accessories into necessities!

The way you lay aside your weights is by denying yourself—denying the weights—and taking up your cross to follow Jesus. **When you consider yourself crucified with Christ, all weights are gone!**

For some of you, you are weighed down with fears and doubts about God. You are restless and have found that the things that you have given so much weight to really are not worth it at all. You are weary of being on the treadmill of religious performance, of trying to be good enough for God, and the weight of trying to be righteous has pressed you down in despair. I want you to know that Jesus has a word for you. Here is what he has to say to you this morning:

“Come to Me, **all you who labor and are heavy laden**, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For **My yoke is easy and My burden is light**” (Matt. 11:28-30).

The way you come to Jesus is to take your heavy burdens and place them at the feet of Jesus. Your sins that have separated you from God can only be reconciled by Jesus who finished His course so that you might know forgiveness and eternal life. Whereas your religious performance are hard, Jesus' yoke is easy. Whereas your burdens are heavy, Jesus' burdens are light. Whereas your heart is restless and undone by the broken promises of the world, with Jesus, you will find rest for your soul as promised to all who come to Him.

Fellow believers, let us set our eyes on Jesus, cast aside all weights that take our eyes off Him, and let us run hard in 2010. The way we will run is determined by what we see. Let us be resolved, to keep our eyes on Jesus because it is only by Him and through Him can we run with endurance and win the prize of bringing pleasure to our heavenly Father. Let us pray.

## **Resolved, to Keep Our Eyes on Jesus, Part 2**

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

#### **I. Introduction**

Last week, I shared with you that everyone who is trusting Jesus Christ is in a race. This is a race for runners, and not just for any kind of runners; it is for those who are passionately pursuing the goal and the prize. They are running to win with the same kind of commitment and resolve as the Olympian going for the gold. The stakes are high, the race is long, and reward is imperishable and of immeasurable worth.

I turned our attention to the great clouded of witnesses, to those who ran with endurance and are surrounding us with the chorus of faithfulness. Those serving as a motivation are not fans of the race as spectators; they are those ran their race and finished with the same kind of focus and resolve we need today.

Then we looked at what Scripture reveals are the "weights" which encumber us, distract us, and prevent us from being able to finish the race. The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the desires for other things, the engagement in the "affairs of this life" all entangle us to the point that we are lured away from the all-important race. We must lay them aside.

But do you remember how I said you do this? What was the one simple statement I challenged you to think about? It was this:

#### **The way you run is determined by what you see.**

When what you see are the circumstances around you, people's opinions of you, all the offerings and enticements of the world, these things that initially get a peripheral glance become a preoccupied gaze. Things that accessories become matters of necessities, and because you have set your sights on them, they in turn blind you from the glory of the heavenly prize and the endurance you need to finish your race.

The way you deal with these weights is to have the weight of the gospel laid upon you through a gospel-driven kind of endurance. **By looking upon Jesus, you gain a proper perspective on all the other things that want to have weight in your life, and as you look to Him, you find Him to be all that you need and all that you want.** The prescription for Christian “weight-loss” then is to consider the weightlessness of Jesus in His life, deny yourself, and take up your cross to follow Him.

I want to go back to Hebrews 12:1-3 this morning and finish up by dealing specifically with “the sin” which snares us. Look with me at these three verses, beginning in verse one:

<sup>1</sup> Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> 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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.  
Hebrews 12:1-3

One of the things we learn in Scripture is that as Christians we “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). There are things we cannot see, do not know, have no idea will come in our journey that we address head-on with faith in our God who sees and knows everything, and of whom nothing is impossible. Were we able to see everything, faith would be unnecessary and God would be inconsequential.

The apostle tells us that this is a race that is “set before us.” This tells us something about our lives. We know, for instance, that those who are saved by grace through faith are also those who have “good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). God has mapped out not only the race before you but also the good works that you are called to perform. God is telling you that you have no idea what this next year holds out for you, and therefore you must run with unrelenting faith. But at the same time God is telling you that **the race has been conceived and constructed ahead of time by Him.** The race before you has been crafted and determined by God’s ordering in divine providence and by God’s wisdom in His divine purposes.

Well, is there anything we can learn from the race that God has set before other people in the past? What do we see in the kind of race set before **those in Hebrews 11**? In the race set **before Jesus**? At least, we can conclude that **the race is not going to be easy.** Jesus could never be accused of false advertising. He tells all those who would be His followers to count the cost, to lose their lives for His sake, to take up their crosses, that they would be hated by all on account of their identification with Him, and that even their own families would become their enemies. Perhaps Hebrews 11 is written is that we would be sobered up to what we should expect in the race set before us. When all your earthly goods are plundered and your family is imprisoned (as seen in Heb. 10), is it not likely that you would become weary and discouraged? You have need of endurance, of persevering faith in the promises of God.

The apostle begins Hebrews 11 with a definition of faith and then in verse 6 speaks of the absolutely necessity in the Christian race. In Hebrews 11:1, he states:

<sup>1</sup> Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.  
Hebrews 11:1

While the apostle gives us one verse in **definition**, he gives us 38 verses in **description** of faith before he gives us the **prescription** for faith in our text. Christians are to be a hopeful people—those who have a confidence and surety in God and bear witness of things that cannot be weighed or discerned by the human eye. **The evidence for God is not by plausible argumentation, but the dynamic testimony of those who by faith endured by seeing Him who is invisible.** When Christians live with radical faith in God and display and unwavering confidence and hope in the midst of adversity, the watching world will have the evidence for God before them and substance, the worth, and the great value that God is for His people. But notice that faith is not optional. In verse six, the apostle adds:

<sup>6</sup> But without faith *it is impossible to please Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*  
Hebrews 11:6

The goal of every Christian ought to be to please God. It was the passion of Jesus. The joy set before Him was to glorify His father and accomplish the mission His Father had given Him. And to add to his definition in verse one, he adds that the functioning of faith must consist in believing that (1) God is real and (2) God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. This definition is going to be particularly instructive as we consider “the sin” which so easily ensnares us in the Christian race.

## II. Unbelief—The Great Disabler (v. 1b) – “the sin which snares us”

In our text, we are told that we are not only to lay aside the weight but also “the sin.” Notice it is definite. *The sin.* What is he referring to here? From the context in the previous chapter and really the entire book of Hebrews, the sin of which he is referring to is **the sin of unbelief.**

Unbelief is **the great disabler** in the Christian race. While we are called to run to win, we are also prone to wander. While we are to believe in Jesus with all our heart, we are tempted to unbelief, doubt, fear, and despair. **Unbelief takes our eyes off Jesus, manifesting a lack of confidence, the absence of trust, and an inability to hope in God.** Earlier in his letter to the Christian community, he warned them against this sin of unbelief. In Hebrews 3, he exhorts them, beginning in verse 12:

<sup>12</sup> Beware, brethren, lest there be **in any of you an evil heart of unbelief** in departing from the living God; <sup>13</sup> but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be **hardened** through the deceitfulness of sin.  
Hebrews 3:12-13

The race set before the generation who experienced the great Exodus resulted in all of them perishing in the wilderness with the exception two people: Caleb and Joshua. The rest of them did not finish the race. Why? There was in them an evil heart of unbelief that led to their departing from the living God. This God who delivered them out of slavery from Egypt, who provided them miracle upon miracle, **became the object of their scorn, mumbling, and groaning in the wilderness.** Their hearts had become hardened against God, and the sin of unbelief ran its full course in leading to their disqualification in their race.

And here we are being told, yea, we are being **warned** not to have an evil heart of unbelief to depart from God. As fellow runners in the race, we are to exhort each other on a daily basis to make much of God, to provoke one another in greater love and devotion to Him.

Now at this point I want you to think with me to what Hebrews 11:6 says about faith. Anyone who comes to God must believe that He is real and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him. What then is the sin of unbelief? Is it not living as though God is **NOT** real and running as though He is **NOT** a rewarder of those who seek Him? **What does the sin of unbelief look like then?**

If faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, then **unbelief means that there would be no substance and no evidence for God in your life.** God would be inconsequential or irrelevant. God is not weighty or valuable or worth treasuring. God is an add-on, an accessory at best, a relationship of obligation because you don't want to go to hell when you die.

Unbelief is simply **functional atheism.** It is running a race without any passion for the prize. God does not factor in your life. It is perhaps best summed up in what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:30-32 in which he says:

**30 Why are we in danger every hour? 31 I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! 32 What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."**  
1 Corinthians 15:30-32

Paul is saying that if the dead are not raised, if the gospel is not true, if God is not real, then let us eat and drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. He is not saying be a glutton and drunkard; rather, **the eating and drinking is the ordinary matters of life which are to be lived with no consciousness of God.** Just go on in the good life, the American Dream, the pattern of this world with all that it values and pursues. Jesus does not matter.

The sin of unbelief can be manifested in outright atheism, blatant rebellion, or a self-destructive lifestyle. However, Scripture warns us that **the most common form of atheism and godlessness is found in upstanding citizens in everyday life who give no thought of God, have no value for the words of God, and care not for the Son of God.** And as Christians, the everyday danger of unbelief is to allow an evil heart of unbelief to take root in our lives that there is no substance or evidence of God in our lives.

Over the course of this year, you will awaken each day with the temptation to be a functional atheists. No, I know you believe God; you will just be pressured to live in a such a way that you forget God, you deny God *not in defiance but by His habitual absence from your everyday life*. Let me put it this way: **If the record books of 2010 were unfolded on January 1, 2011, would there be enough evidence or substance to convict you of the reality of God? Does the evidence argue in favor of a great God worthy of being trusted and treasured?** The sin of unbelief wants to cancel out all evidence and take you off course of running the race with faithful endurance. God wants your life to be so marked by Him that not a square inch of your existence can be sustained apart from faith in Him.

For some of you, this year will be one of **growth, success, and prosperity**. Unbelief will want you to revel in the blessings, to give you a sense of **self-sufficiency** and live **independently** of God, continually **forgetting** that all you have has come from Him. The sin of unbelief manifests when you think that the blessings God gives is better than having God Himself, and so the good things become ultimate things that ruin your race.

For others of you, this year will be one of **hardship, affliction, loss, and abundant trials**. Unbelief will want you to **doubt** the goodness of God and cause you to sink into **despair**, looking for other things to save you from your dire circumstances. In both prosperity and affliction, unbelief crouches and clings to you. You must cast it aside!

Do you remember when Jesus encountered the presence of unbelief the strongest in his ministry? Where did it come from? Who were they? Look with me in Matthew 13, where at the close of his parables on the kingdom, Jesus enters into his hometown. Beginning with verse 53, we read:

<sup>53</sup> Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. <sup>54</sup> When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this *Man* get this wisdom and *these* mighty works? <sup>55</sup> Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this *Man* get all these things?" <sup>57</sup> So **they were offended at Him**.  
But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." <sup>58</sup> Now He did not do many mighty works there **because of their unbelief**.  
Matthew 13:53-58

The place where Jesus encountered the strongest measure of unbelief was from those who claimed to know Him best. They were people from his hometown, fellow neighbors, perhaps childhood friends. Matthew says that were offended both by what Jesus said (wisdom) and did (mighty works), and the result was that Jesus did not do many might works because of their unbelief. They held Jesus in contempt, claiming that what they knew about Him was accurate and real, **but when the real Jesus showed up, they did not believe in Him**.

Some of you have known and heard of Jesus for a long time. You have read the Bible stories since you were a child. You have come to believe in Jesus, and you are in this race. **Could it be that the sin of unbelief that you need to lay aside is your familiarity with Jesus?** By that I mean, **could it be that you have gotten over Jesus, that grace is not amazing, mercy is not fresh, and God's glory is now but a shadow in your life?** Jesus will not do mighty works in the presence of unbelief, and we cannot expect God to do great things in our lives this year if we have only a casual grasp of the gospel.

Unbelief will come in so many subtle ways. If it is not in **covetousness**, making much of the things of the world, it will come through **pride**, making much of yourself. Unbelief will make a doubter out of you, questioning whether God is really trustworthy and His promises are really true. It is questioning God's purposes for your life, and instead of embracing the race God has set before you with you, you grumble and complain, having been persuaded that your life would be better otherwise. Is this not what the serpent did with Adam and Eve in the garden. The first words of the devil recorded in Scripture are, **"Has God really said . . .?"** And since then, he has actively been working unbelief in the hearts of sinners to keep them from seeing Jesus.

If unbelief is the great disabler, we must lay it aside. Daily! Our running and finishing the race is dependent upon it. **Do you think that if those in Hebrews 11, the crowd around us, had a heart of unbelief that they would have been able to suffer well, to perform great conquests, and persevere?** God was seen as more **precious** than anything in this world. They **treasured** him more than their lives because they knew Him to be more real than life itself, and so they pleased God with the faith that finishes races displaying **the infinite worth of God**. Their lives of faith revealed a people who had been **dominated by God**, and it was through their races we see **how valuable the reward is** for all who finish with such faithfulness.

### **III. Jesus—The Great Enabler (v. 2-3) – “looking to Jesus...”** **The Means by Which We Run – Consider Him!**

The good news we have today is that Jesus is the great enabler who has purchased our faith and has promised to complete it. The way to lay aside unbelief is through renewed faith in Jesus by looking to Him. As I said earlier, **the way we run is determined by what we see**. If through the sin of unbelief, we are blinded, distracted, and clouded in our vision of God, it is through faith in Jesus then we get a clearer, closer vision of God. **There is nothing you or I need more this year than a clearer vision of Jesus, to have our eyes fixed on Him so that all weights come off and all unbelief is dispelled.**

Two things must be said about this looking. **First**, it is a constant and continual look. **Looking is present tense because the presence of unbelief is always about us**. If you think that you can make it with once glance at Jesus, you are doomed to fail. We must be constant and continual in our looking to Jesus, for when we have trained to have the eyes of faith fixed on Him, the rest will follow. **Second**, it is singular look. The Greek word is *aphorontes*. The prefix of this word is “away or from”. The meaning of this word is twofold: **it is looking away from something and looking to something**, in this text, Jesus. Our continual looking must be looking away from the world, the weights, the things that hinder our running, and be singularly, undividedly looking to Jesus.

In Scripture, looking is a synonym for believing and trusting in God. Paul prays that “**having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you**” (Eph. 1:18). According to 2 Corinthians 4:4 the devil “**has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**”. The devil does not want people to see Christ through the light of the gospel, and he is “keeping them” (actively and continuously) in darkness. Not only does the devil **blind** you, but also the world wants to **distract** you with weights. Therefore, we must be relentless and unyielding in our looking to Jesus!

How should we see Jesus? Let me give you four ways to look to Jesus from our text.

First, we should see Jesus in **His submission to the Father**. Our text that Jesus’ motivation was the “joy set before Him.” Here is a Son who ever lives to please His Father. Not a word is spoken on accord, not a deed performed without His Father’s command. The Father was well pleased with Jesus, and Jesus was passionately about the Father, getting up early to spend time with Him, sometimes all night in prayerful communion with Him. When it came to drinking the bitter cup of the Father’s curse against sin and bearing His wrath, even then it was His prayer, “Not my will but yours be done.” The joy before Jesus was the glory of His Father and purchasing salvation for His people. Jesus said that when we look to Him and abide in Him, His joy is put in us, and not only that, but He gives it in full measure (John 15:11).

In your race, you will face time where you are wrongfully treated, abused, and bear the injustices of a fallen world. How will you respond? Will you look to revenge? Will you look to yourself or others, or will you submit yourself to the Father and look to Jesus who has providentially put such circumstances in your race for your good?

Second, we should see Jesus in **His humiliation at the cross**. Our text says that Jesus “endured the cross, despising its shame.” Jesus, the eternal Son of God, clothing Himself in humanity, became like us in utter humility in order that He might die for sinners. The perfect, spotless Lamb of God was innocent in every way but was mocked, beaten, stripped naked, spat upon, and treated as the worst of all criminals. When you are looking to Jesus, this attitude and mindset should be in you, as Paul noted in Philippians 2:

<sup>6</sup> who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.  
Philippians 2:6-8

Third, we should see Jesus in **His exaltation on the throne of heaven**. Our text says that Jesus has “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” This is something that the writer of Hebrews points to on several occasions. For instance, in Hebrews 1:3 it is written that Jesus is

... the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, **sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**,  
Hebrews 1:3

He summarizes the entirety of chapter 7 regarding the priesthood with the first verse of chapter 8:

<sup>1</sup> Now *this is* the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, **who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,**  
Hebrews 8:1

And when he speaks of the sacrificial system in chapter 10, he says of Jesus:

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, **sat down at the right hand of God,**  
Hebrews 10:12

Clearly, the apostle wants us to have a vision of Jesus as King over heaven and earth, ruling and reigning as omnipotent and almighty. Here in chapter 12, when we run our race, the apostles doesn't want us to look to Jesus as someone who has limited resources or has His hands tied due to the immensity of our circumstances. He is on His throne, victorious indeed! And we run not to become victorious in ourselves, but from the victory of the cross which is ours through faith in Jesus!

Finally, we should see Jesus in **His purchasing and perfecting our faith**. If Jesus had not completed His race, our faith would be futile and our running would be in vain. It is because of Jesus' faithfulness to the Father that He has been given the title as the Author of our faith. It begins in Him because He purchased the gift of faith on the cross on our behalf. But it does not end there.

Jesus is not only the purchaser of our faith, He is also **the object of our faith**. We don't have faith in faith, but faith in Jesus. It is not necessarily faith that causes us to persevere but what faith connects us to, and that is Jesus Christ! **This is why the sin of unbelief is so deadly**. Sever the connection between you and Jesus, and you are done. Jesus purchased our faith so that we would in return look to Him as the object of our faith. He is both the source and the end!

But notice Jesus is **the finisher or perfecter of our faith**. He who began a good work in you will bring it completion (Phil. 1:6), and that good work is conforming us into the image of Christ through a continual looking upon Jesus as seen in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4-6). **In the past**, Jesus authored your faith; **in the present**, Jesus is strengthening your faith as you look upon Him; **in the future**, Jesus will perfect your faith. Just think of it: Jesus purchased in his death on the cross our salvation—past, present, and future. He takes joy in the completion of your faith and so wants you to look to Him as you run in order that you may finish well! The joy set before Jesus was a pure and perfect bride adorned for Him. As He has before Himself the finished product, you should have before yourself the prize of seeing Jesus face to face!

Jesus has not given you a measure of faith and left you to yourself to run the race alone. No! He is the **object** before whom you should set your gaze, and **He is the means** by which you are able to run the race with endurance! Therefore, **it should be our prayer each day, "Lord, increase my faith!"** The progress in our race is determined not by the strength of our legs but by the devotedness of our hearts. In other words, your race is determined by what you see! We must, we need to have a clearer, closer, and continual vision of Jesus!

## IV. Application: How Will You Run in 2010?

What difference should having our eyes opened to such a wonderful Savior have in our running? Absolutely everything!

But specifically, our consideration of Him, as commanded in verse three, has in mind this sobering reality. He writes,

<sup>3</sup> For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.  
Hebrews 12:3

You are going to get weary when pressed up against the crucible of adversity, and you are going to face discouragement when the race hits a seemingly insurmountable incline. When those moments come, will it be that God is seen as obvious in your life? When life gets bitter, do you have someone before you who is pleasant? When it seems to be getting out of control, do you look to someone who can control the winds and waves of the sea? When life feels empty through betrayal, disappointment, and loss, do you look to Him who promised never to leave you nor forsake you, who is with you always? When life is overcome by difficulties, perplexities, and anxieties, do you look away from them to Him who told you to cast all your cares upon Him because He cares for you?

In those moments, don't be a functional atheist! Let the weight of the gospel and the glories of Calvary so dominate your life that Jesus can be found in every aspect of your life! In order to run with endurance, God wants total abandonment, absolute surrender, radical obedience, and a genuine confession that says, "God is good, His grace is sufficient, and Jesus is glorious." **You have need of endurance, and that endurance is renewed and refreshed by a clear, close, and continual looking to Jesus.** You need to know that there is a race marked out for you determined by God. You need to know that every step of the race, the sin of unbelief can cripple and paralyze so that you do not finish. You need to know that the devil will seek to blind you and the world will seek to distract you from looking to Jesus. And you need to know that Jesus has put His joy in you so that as you run, You feel His pleasure, and that the faith to finish has been purchased by Him, is being strengthened through Him, and will be perfected as you look to Him!

Let me close with these words penned from a prayer found in the book *The Valley of Vision*:

O LORD,

The world is artful to entrap,  
approaches in fascinating guise,  
extends many a gilded bait,  
presents many a charming face.

Let my faith scan every painted bauble,  
and escape every bewitching snare  
in a victory that overcomes all things.

In my duties give me firmness, energy, zeal,  
devotion to thy cause,  
courage in thy name,

love as a working grace,  
and all commensurate with my trust.

Let faith stride forth in giant power,  
and love respond with energy in every act.

I often mourn the absence of my beloved Lord  
whose smile makes earth a paradise,  
whose voice is sweetest music,  
whose presence gives all graces strength.

But by unbelief I often keep him outside my door.  
Let faith give entrance that he may abide with me forever.

Thy Word is full of promises,  
flowers of sweetest fragrance,  
fruit of refreshing flavour when culled by faith.

May I be made rich in its riches,  
be strong in its power,  
be happy in its joy,  
abide in its sweetness,  
feast on its preciousness,  
draw vigour from its manna.

Lord, increase my faith.