

Running the Race That's Already Been Won

Hebrews 12:1-3

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 24, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3, NRSV)

✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠ ✠

On October 12th, in Vienna, Austria, a Kenyan named Eliud Kipchoge did what no human being had ever been able to do. He ran a marathon, 26.2 miles, in under 2 hours. 1 hour, 59 minutes and 40 seconds, to be exact. In terms of athletic achievement, this was a milestone that most people believed would never be achieved. It was akin to Roger Bannister breaking the 4 minute mile in 1954. To put it in perspective, Kipchoge went out and ran the first mile in 4:35, and then did that again 25 times in a row. Even if you're not a fan of running, it's a feat worth celebrating.

Running is a beautiful sport which I've truly come to appreciate because two of my kids have been competitive runners. In some ways, it's the purest sport. A human being trying to battle gravity, and fatigue, and fellow runners, to push on towards a finish line and a prize. It's also one of the oldest sports. My favorite sport, baseball, has only been around since 1869. Running has been around forever. In fact, the Bible itself makes many references to competitive running. Biblical writers were familiar with the Olympic Games because they began over 700 years before Christ.

The New Testament often compares the Christian life to a long distance race. It's a fitting comparison. The Christian life is hard and requires sacrifice and endurance. Training is essential if you are going to succeed. You will do much better if you have companions along the way to run beside you and to cheer you on. And of course, there is a great prize at the finish line. If running is too unfamiliar to be a

helpful comparison, choose some other long endeavor in its place: finishing a degree in school, raising a child, rebuilding an engine or a house, anything that has the same elements as running a marathon. Whatever metaphor you choose, the point is the same - the Christian life is a long, hard endeavor. In fact, if you find following Jesus to be easy, chances are you're not following Jesus. He himself plainly declared, **"The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are a few that find it."**¹

One of the most poignant passages in the New Testament which makes this comparison is the one we just read from Hebrews 12. To set the context, the writer of Hebrews has just spent the entire previous chapter recounting a list of Old Testament men and women who ran and finished the race of faith well, people like Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, and David. He then turns his focus on his readers, including us today, and essentially says, "Now you run the same race that others have run before you!"

At the heart of this challenge is the simple direction that we are to be, **"looking to Jesus..."** I actually like the NIV translation better. It reads, **"...fixing our eyes on Jesus..."** I think that better captures the writer's intent. The most important thing a Christian is to do in life is to continuously fix his or her eyes on Jesus Christ.

I've watched a lot of high school cross country races over the last few years and in many of these races, which might include as many as 400 runners, there is somebody on a mountain bike or in a golf cart who is riding just ahead of the runners showing them the way. Oftentimes the course is unfamiliar to runners and there are usually lots of left or right options along the way. It's easy to get off track. In fact, I watched a race just last weekend where a group of runners in the lead took a wrong turn in the hills and were disqualified because they cut off a large section of the race course. So if you have somebody ahead of you on a bike or in a golf cart who knows the course, who has been on the course, you are wise to keep your eyes fixed on that person. They go left, and you go left even if going right seems to make more sense. They go uphill, and you go uphill even if you'd rather go downhill.

¹ Matthew 7:14 (NRSV)

Let me make this simple. Jesus is asking us to follow him on a course through life that he has already traveled. He is out ahead of us and he knows the way. We do not serve a God who has confined himself to heaven and is unfamiliar with the joys and pain of life as a human being. As Hebrews 4:15 declares, **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”**² The eternal Son of God took on human flesh, became one of us, and was subjected to every hardship, every challenge, every temptation that you and I will ever face. He even experienced death, the worst death possible. But he knows the way through, even through death, for the grave could not contain him. That means that if you follow Jesus through life there is no point along the way where he will say, “Oh my, I didn’t see that coming! Wow, there’s an unexpected twist in the trail. Here’s something I’ve never faced before.” Never. You are following a guide who knows the way. He is the pioneer of our faith, the one who has gone before us and now goes ahead of us.

But notice the writer here declares that Jesus is not only the *pioneer* of our faith, but the **“*perfecter of our faith.*”** In other words, Jesus not only knows the way, he *is* the way. You see, Jesus does not just set an example for us to follow, and that’s very good news. Imagine trying to follow Jesus’ example. It’d be akin to running a marathon and trying to follow Eliud Kipchoge’s example, except much, much harder. We can never live and love the way Jesus lived and loved. We always fall terribly short. So ultimately Jesus is not just our example but our *substitute*. He ran the race for us, a race we never could have completed ourselves. He obeyed for us, fulfilled the law for us, lived sinless for us, was faithful to God for us, suffered the consequences of sin for us, and was ultimately raised to eternal life for us. As writer Tim Keller puts it, “The gospel is not that we give God this great performance and then God blesses us, but that in Jesus Christ God gives us a perfect record which we receive by faith and then we bless him.”³

Here’s what this means. Listen to me carefully. It means that if you fix your eyes on Jesus and follow him and him alone through life, you cannot fail. You cannot fall short. You don’t need to worry about being unable to finish the race. Your performance is no longer your concern. You will finish. You will succeed. You will win the prize. Why? *Because he has already done it for you! He has already finished the race! He has already perfected your faith!* Your sin is forgiven. Your failures

are accounted for. The challenges ahead are already overcome. They will be painful to go through, yes, but they will not be the end of you. Even death. Death is nothing to you. In Christ, it is nothing to you!

This is why the plea is so desperate. Fix your eyes on Jesus! He doesn’t just know the way; he *is* the way! He’s the only way! It’s what A.W. Tozer means when he writes that, “faith is the gaze of a soul upon a saving God.”⁴ I’ve heard it said that attention is worship, that the thing you most pay attention to in life is the thing you most worship. That’s absolutely true, and it begs the question: Where are your eyes fixed, not just here on Sunday mornings, but all through the week? What captures and holds your attention? What are you following after these days? There is no more important question you ought to ask yourself.

All this, of course, raises the question of faith. And faith, just to be clear, has nothing to do with certainty. And it’s not something we have inside as much as it is something we do. Writer Fredrick Buechner puts it this way, “Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure of where you’re going but going anyway. A journey without maps.”⁵

Without maps, yes, but not without a guide. And here is the call and the claim of the guide. “Follow me,” Jesus says. “I love you and I forgive you. I have made a way for you and a place for you. I only want the best for you. I will not fail you or leave you. There is trouble in this world, but I have overcome this world. So make every other priority and affection secondary. Rearrange your entire life around me and my ways. Humble yourself and give up control. Tell the truth about your sin; you will only see me respond with love and grace. Hold loosely to your possessions. Do not worry or be anxious. Let me teach you how to love and forgive even your enemies. Fix your eyes on me constantly.”

It’s a big ask, right? It’s all or nothing. And faith is required, not just agreement in your mind but movement in your life. I can’t just say I trust Jesus; I have to actually follow him, to obey his commands, to go his way, even when I don’t understand. Faith is not easy, but don’t be fooled into thinking that there is an alternative to faith. Everybody in the world is on a journey of faith of one kind or another.

You see, as humans we are all ultimately striving for the very same things. We want to belong, to be

² NIV

³ Tag Archives: Tim Keller, “Another Definition of Love” (August 25, 2011). <https://brokenheartedboldness.wordpress.com/tag/tim-keller/>

⁴ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Christian Publications Inc., 1948).

⁵ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (Harper & Row, 1973), 25.

included. We want to be valued and found worthy. We ache for purpose and meaning in life. We thirst for joy and peace that are not subject to our circumstances. Every human soul desires the same things but not every human being is fixing his or her eyes in the same place to acquire those things. Some look to money and material wealth. Others look to worldly success or relevance, or to the esteem of others. Others try to find it solely in romantic companionship, or in their children. Some look to the experiences of this life, to travel, to food, to sex, to politics. But none of these pathways is free of faith. The person who fixes his eyes on money, for example, on wealth to satisfy his soul, cannot say for certain where the journey will lead him. Worshipping money also requires faith.

Is there a risk in following Jesus, in giving up everything for his sake? Yes. It's huge! Am I told beforehand exactly where the road will lead when I set out to follow Christ? No. I'm really just given the next step at best. Can I prove to you that following Jesus leads to the life we all ache for in our souls? No, I can't *prove* it to you. But neither can you prove to me that money, or family, or status, or sex, or reputation, or any other thing in and of itself will satisfy in the end. All of us are on a journey of faith. The difference, of course, is what you put your faith in. Will it deliver?

I'll be honest with you. I've been running this race for many years now, trying to fix my eyes on Jesus for a long time, and yet there have been many points along the way when I have found myself full of doubts. More than once I've even wondered if I'm on the wrong track entirely. Does God even exist? Is Jesus even real? I'm sure I'll come to that place again at some point. It's in that place that I always think of that time in John's Gospel when lots of people quit the race all at once. The text says that at one point many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer followed him. This happens all the time, by the way. I know people in our own church who have dropped out of the race, even some who are in the process of doing so even now. And so Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them straight up, **"Do you also with so go away?"** Do you also want to drop out of the race? And I think often about Peter's answer. **"Lord,"** he says, **"to whom can we go? You have the words of life."**⁶

And that's where I always end up. Where else would I go? Who else would I follow? Every pursuit is a pursuit of faith, each full of doubts. Jesus has been faithful to me. I have experienced it. I remember. And, yes, there are times when I don't know where he is, times when I don't know why things are so hard. There

is much I don't understand. He often seem so slow in keeping his promises. I have so many questions. But where else am I going to go? Jesus alone has the words of life. He is life. So I fix my eyes on him, not just once, but day after day after day.

Can you say the same? Has Jesus given you the gift of faith, a heart and a life willing to pursue him regardless? If not, it is there for the asking. There is nothing you lack. No matter where you are in life – what you know or don't know, where you have been or not been, what you have done or not done – it's just a matter of looking to Christ. It doesn't have to be on a Sunday morning; a Tuesday afternoon works just fine. It doesn't have to be in a church building; a bar, or a bedroom, or a cubicle, or a ditch by the side of the road will do. You don't have to be pastor. Pastors have no advantages. A plumber, a lawyer, a teacher, a truck driver, a ninety-year-old or a child – all that matters is that you look to Christ.

And you don't even need a great deal of faith! A little will do. I've heard that most Canadians understand that there are just two kinds of ice: thick ice and thin ice. You can have enormous faith in thin ice and very little faith in thick ice. In other words, if you march out onto thin ice with total certainty it will hold you up, your big faith won't help you because you'll still fall through into the frigid water. However, even if your faith is so minuscule that it takes you 2 hours to take even one baby step out onto the thick ice, your tiny faith will still be enough to get you across the lake. It's not how much faith you have but that which you place your faith in, and your willingness to take a step forward in spite of your little faith, in spite of your doubts.⁷

Jesus said that faith the size of a mustard seed would do.⁸ So you have lots of doubts? Me too! Remember faith is a verb, not a noun. It's not the absence of doubt, but the willingness to step forward in the midst of doubt. And when you step forward in pursuit of Jesus, with your eyes fixed on him, he will not fail you. That makes the next step after him easier to take. Faith builds when its object is found to be faithful, and our God is always faithful.

Once we set out on this race following Jesus, fixing our eyes on him continuously, there are two other gifts we are given along the way.

First, we are given what Hebrews 12 calls **"a great cloud of witnesses."** If you have ever run a long-distance race you know how essential it is to have

⁷ I'm borrowing this illustration from Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Zondervan, 2000), 240.

⁸ Matthew 17:20.

⁶ John 6:66-68 (NRSV)

people cheering you on, even running by your side. When Eliud Kipchoge ran his race, there were thousands of spectators cheering him along every step of the way. He also had three dozen other runners who rotated in and out of the race to run alongside him to set the pace. On top of that, there were countless coaches, trainers, and fellow athletes who helped him prepare for the race. I'm sure even he would tell you that he never would have succeeded without this great cloud of witnesses surrounding him.

The Bible, and church history, are filled with examples of fellow saints who have run the race ahead of us and claimed victory at the end. Not just people like Abraham, and David, and Deborah, and Peter, and James, and Mary. And not just people like Augustine, and John Calvin, and Harriet Tubman, and Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King Jr. But also people much less widely known – grandparents and parents, youth group leaders, friends along the way, pastors or Sunday school teachers, brothers and sisters who modeled faith for us and have now gone on ahead of us. Be encouraged that this crowd of witnesses cheers you on towards the finish line of a race they have already completed.

Furthermore, thank God we have fellow runners, brothers and sisters who are not just our training partners but who race right alongside us. Our Life Groups are really training groups. Our families are often the same. We need one another in this congregation to encourage each other along the way. Sometimes I don't have enough faith so I need to rely on your faith. Later on down the road I'll do the same for you. Nobody follows Jesus in isolation. Nobody runs this race alone. As the Desert Fathers put it centuries ago, "One Christian is no Christian."

The second gift we are given are the spiritual practices or disciplines which help us do what the writer of Hebrews tells us we must do, which is to **"lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely"** so that we run the race with endurance. Athletes in the ancient world often ran naked to maximize their efficiency. If I had to run a race naked, I'd probably run my fastest race ever – just to get to the end where I could get dressed again! Serious runners cut off every ounce possible – their body weight, their clothes, their shoes, even shaving their legs – to make themselves better runners. Nobody carries a backpack or puts on winter coat in a marathon.

There is so much in our lives that weighs us down from pursuing Christ. Some of that, yes, is our sin, our tendency to want to live life on our terms rather than his terms. So we must practice things like confession,

and community, and silence, and worship, disciplines that help us become aware of our sin that we might find grace that restores and protects. But frankly, a lot of what holds us back is distraction. We are so rushed. We are so addicted to our devices. There is always so much noise. It's hard to fix our eyes on Jesus when our eyes are fixed everywhere else. Again, attention is worship.

In Life Groups and in other contexts we are trying to help one another learn practices of scripture, and prayer, and solitude and silence, and worship, and service, and fellowship, practicing God's presence and paying attention to God's voice so that our attention will be drawn back again and again to Christ, our eyes fixed on him. These practices are essential for the race, and they are not meant to be private endeavors.

Finally, the goal in all this is not just to follow Christ, but in following Christ to enter into the life of Christ. To know the love of the Father as Jesus knew the love of the Father. To be set free from everything that weighs us down in life. To know the deep joy and peace which characterize life in the Kingdom of God. To live free of fear, even the fear of death. And, of course, to learn to love as Jesus loves.

This is the goal of the journey upon which we are pilgrims, not tourists. A tourist goes off and explores, but then he can just return to the same place every night. A pilgrim, on the other hand, is about progress; she is ever on the way. And at the end of every day she asks herself, "Am I any further along? Have I made it closer to my goal?"⁹ Paul writes in Philippians 3, **"But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."**¹⁰

Let me end with a thought that I hope will be a great encouragement to you. Yes, Jesus is the way, he is the truth, he is the life. Apart from him there is no ultimate hope and so we fix our eyes on him, the one who has already finished the race for us. But as we fix our eyes on Christ, take heart because *he also has his eyes fixed on you!* I love the way A.W. Tozer puts it. He writes,

The foundation of my faith in God is knowing that I am a fixture in His mind. This is where my faith begins, and it is where I begin to understand my place in God's thinking. When I understand how God thinks about me, it starts me on the journey of

⁹ Insight from William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Letter of Hebrews* (Westminster Press, 1976), 171.

¹⁰ Philippians 3:13-14 (NIV)

faith. I can trust the One who has my best interests in mind for the longest period of time.¹¹

The 15th century German theologian Nicholas of Cusa said it this way, “All my endeavor is turned towards Thee because all Thy endeavor is turned toward me.” Long before we ever even thought of fixing our eyes on Jesus, Jesus has had his eyes fixed on us. He is the pioneer *and* perfecter of our faith. He has suffered and endured even death for our sakes. The race has already been run, the victory secured. So let us fix our eyes on him. Let us not grow weary. Let us not lose heart. He has not failed us and he never will.

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. In your experience, how is the Christian life like running a marathon race? If not a marathon, what other analogy would you use to describe the Christian life?
2. Read Hebrews 12:1-3. What is the main thing you hear from this text?
3. We are told to look to Jesus (fix our eyes on him) because he is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” What does that mean? And how do we look to Jesus?
4. Is it right to say that Jesus has already finished the race for us? Is Tim Keller right when he says, “The gospel is not that we give God this great performance and then God blesses us, but that in Jesus Christ God gives us a perfect record which we receive by faith and then we bless him.”?
5. A.W. Tozer says, “The foundation of my faith in God is knowing that I am a fixture in His mind.” Do you agree? Do we fix our eyes on Jesus because he has first fixed his eyes on us?
6. Who is in your ‘crowd of witnesses’ right now, those who have either run the race already or who are running alongside you?

7. What do you hear Christ saying to you through this passage and this message?
8. How are you going to respond? What is one step you sense Christ is now leading you to take?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Is following Jesus in life easy or hard?
How do we make sure we don’t get lost along the way?

¹¹ *The Quotable Tozer*, compiled and edited by James L. Snyder (Bethany House, 2018), 124.