**Joseph Kim [2016 New Year’s Message]**

**LET US FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS**

**Hebrews 12:1-29**

**Key Verses: 1b-2**

**“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”**

Happy New Year! It’s good to see everyone. I hope everyone had a wonderful Christmas time with family and friends.

So 2015 has ended and 2016 is upon us. Are we ready for 2016? (I’m going to say 2016 a few times because it still doesn’t sound real). Time flies when we’re having fun, right?

Speaking of fun, in today’s fast-paced and connected world, many things pull our hearts to satisfy our desires. We are bombarded by so many choices, such as instant access on our smartphones to find a restaurant that fits our mood or be able buy instantly from the couch what we want through Amazon’s 1-Click. There’s instant entertainment through YouTube videos and Netflix. The world has so many things to offer!

The Christians in the first century faced many challenges from the world as well. The author of Hebrew told them to fix their eyes on Jesus because Jesus is the solution to their challenges. Likewise, we want to think about why we should fix our eyes on Jesus as we run the race marked out for us. We want to also think about how we can run this race through God’s discipline in our lives.

Let’s start with prayer.

**Part I. We are Running a Race Marked Out for Us (1)**

Verse 1b reads, “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” The purpose of Hebrews was to strongly encourage the early Jewish Christians to persevere and the author continues to do so in this chapter. The Jewish Christians started strong in their faith. Due to hardships they faced as time passed, however, they lost heart and grew weary. So the author reminds them that their life of faith is like a race. Not only is living a life of faith like a race, but it is marked out for us. This means that God gives Christians a calling and purpose for our lives.

When we think about a race, my first thought is the Olympics. It’s a grand spectacle of racing – to run as fast as possible, dive as straight as possible, jump as high as possible, and curl as carefully as possible. The purpose of it all is to stand on the pedestal with a gold medal hanging around the neck and singing the national anthem. It is truly a glorious moment for an Olympic athlete. But what about for us regular people? Are we in a race? I certainly believe so. We are racing every day to meet due dates for our homework, to get the best possible grades, to get that dream job, to meet deadlines at our jobs, to do the best work as possible so that we get that promotion instead of that other person, to get our children into the best schools ahead of others, and so on. Then what’s our glorious moment? Is it being able to buy that dream house, dream car, luxury vacation, children going to Harvard University, or retire at 40 years old?

For God’s chosen people though, we should deeply accept that we are called to run the race marked out for us. All who finish this race are winners far greater than the gold medalists in the Olympics. Our destination is the heavenly kingdom with God our Father and our Lord Jesus.

In this glorious and heavenly race, we are in different stages. Our senior missionaries in our ministry have run the race of faith for over 40 years or even 50 years after receiving and accepting Jesus during their college days. Because of their lives of faith, many of us are here today and they have helped us to come to know Jesus deeply and personally. Brandon is like a young stallion of faith. He started bible study less than 10 years ago and now he is continuing to grow in faith and serves in so many ways.

How would you rate your own race? Are you tired? Discouraged? Exhausted? Complacent? Or are you fully of energy? Full of Joy?

Look at Verse 1 again. In this race, we are not alone. Chapter 12 begins with the word “Therefore” because the previous chapter provides beautiful examples of many different men and women of great faith. The author reminds us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. For example, Moses raced all his life leading over 600,000 people for 40 years looking forward to a heavenly reward. Hebrews 11:26 says, “He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” We can be encouraged by the witnesses, so that we too can finish our race by God’s power.

Look at Verse 1b. “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” Here “everything that hinders” means “weight.” Just as a runner wears a very light-weight shirt and shorts, it’s very difficult to run the race of faith with heavy clothing. In other words, our faith will be greatly hindered when we carry and hold onto baggage. The baggage can be many things, like attachment to worldly hopes, human recognition, or human love. Also, worries of life, broken relationships, trying to live up to people’s expectations, and many other worldly reasons, hinder our life of faith. We should strive to throw these off continually.

Look at Verse 1c. “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Perseverance is defined as steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success. Living a life of faith requires perseverance because we can get discouraged when we don’t see any visible fruit. Many of the heroes and heroines of faith in chapter 11 experienced victories and successes by God’s power. On the other hand, many of them also boldly faced sufferings and loss by God’s power. The author points out that “they did not receive the things promised” (11:13,39). The best things promised that they looked forward to were not earthly but heavenly. Whether they were successful or not in the world, they lived by faith in the invisible God.

There has been a lot of changes in our ministry this past year, but how should view what has happened? In God’s point of view, or human point of view? Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The object of our faith is not visible blessings or successes, but the invisible God who is our very great Reward (Ge 15:1). We must believe that God will fulfill his purpose in our lives in His time and in His way when we continue to seek and serve him wholeheartedly.

**Part II. Fix Our Eyes On Jesus (2-3)**

How do we run with perseverance the race marked for us? When I was studying for my final exam for my last class ever for my graduate degree, I couldn’t wait to be done. I visualized handing the final exam to the professor and walking out of the graduate school building for the final time. After three and half years of juggling school, work, church, parent, and long commutes – I had almost finished the race and was close to reaching my goal. My eyes were fixed on finishing school.

Likewise, the author says in verse 2 to fix our eyes on Jesus. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means that when Jesus is the goal in our race of faith, we can persevere and be able to stay focused on the goal Jesus had. How can we do so and why should we fix our eyes on Jesus?

Looking at verse 2 again, we need to remember that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus is the eternal Word, almighty creator of heaven and earth (John 1:1,14). He humbled Himself and became a human being born in a lowly manager. He came as a regular person, so that he could be a friend to all people around the around.

Because Jesus is God incarnate, he is the pioneer of our faith. This means that he is the author and founder of faith. Jesus is the perfecter of our faith because he suffered and died on the cross to save us from our sins. He finished his mission of faith and gave us a new living hope when we live by faith. Again, Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Verse 2b reads, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” The race of Jesus is the race of the cross. Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him. During his earthly ministry, his joy was carrying out the Father’s will by giving his life to serving people. What was the joy Jesus looked forward to? He looked forward to drawing all of his people including you and me to God through his sacrifice (Jn 12:32). Jesus also looked forward to his resurrection, ascension, and his reunion with the Father in glory (Jn 17:5). Jesus knew that the Father would exalt him to the highest place and give him the name that is above every name (Php 2:9). He prayed to the Father in John 17:13, “I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that those who believe may have the full measure of my joy within them.”

We can have the joy of Jesus now, yet our greatest joy is the hope of the heavenly kingdom. Jesus said, “Look, I am coming soon. My reward is with me, and I will give each person according to what they have done” (Rev 22:12). With this joy set before us, we can run the race of the cross.

Look at verse 3. “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” When we look to Jesus in running the race of faith and have our hope in heaven and eternal life, we are going to face many difficulties in this life. When we are tired and weary, we should fix our eyes on Jesus and we can win the fight of faith. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” Paul also says in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

Charles T. Studd (1860-1931) was a well-known missionary, who gave his life to Jesus at the age of 24 and went to China in the late 1800s. He gave up his future as a nationally renowned cricket player and heir of great wealth. When his brother George became seriously ill, Charles said, "I know that cricket would not last, and honour would not last, and nothing in this world would last, but it was worthwhile living for the world to come." When asked if he had made too great a sacrifice, he answered, “If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.” As the years went by, his love of Christ did not weaken, but rather grew stronger. Seeing an advertisement that read; “Cannibals want missionaries,” he went to central Congo at the age of 50. He dedicated the remaining 21 years of his life for people in Africa. He left a famous poem, a part of which reads,

Only one life, yes only one,

Now let me say,”Thy will be done”;

And when at last I’ll hear the call,

I know I’ll say “’twas worth it all”;

Only one life,’ twill soon be past,

Only what’s done for Christ will last.

When he finished his race on earth, however, he was full of thanks. In a letter he wrote, “As I am nearing my departure from this world, I have but a few things to rejoice: God called me to China and I went; I joyfully acted as Christ told the rich young man to act. My only joys therefore are that when God has given me a work to do, I have not refused it.” We know that he had the full measure of Jesus’ joy.

**Part III. Endure Hardships as Discipline from Our Loving Father (4-29)**

Look at Verses 4-17. A main component of our race of faith is how we react to God’s discipline in our lives. All hardships are part of God’s discipline, but how do we view hardships in our lives? Do we try to run away from it as far as possible? Do we accept it as part of God’s discipline? I always found it fascinating how God applies his words so practically. For instance, for a body builder, a disciplined workout schedule is required to build muscles and it takes many months. Every time a body builder lifts weights, he or she is literally causing tiny rips (or tears) in the muscle fibers. Then the body repairs and adapts the muscles to be stronger and bigger. Lifting weights is so hard because it takes so much discipline, hard work, and it is also painful. But after all the hard work, it does pay off with bigger and stronger muscles.

Similarly, if we don’t accept God’s discipline, it will be very difficult to run the race of faith or fix our eyes on Jesus. Verse 7 reads, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.” As God’s dear children, we all undergo discipline from our loving Father God. Jesus had many disciples, but his core group consisted of only 12 and he spent 3 intensive years with them day and night training them and disciplining them in God’s word in grace and truth. He performed many miraculous sign of God’s power. Jesus changed water to wine, He calmed the storm, and even raised a man from the dead. He challenged them continuously by telling them: “You Give Them Something to Eat!” and “Whoever wants to be my disciple, must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Those 3 years were critical in laying the foundation of faith in them.

Verse 10b reads, “…but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness.” We need to also remember that God disciplines us so that we can grow in his holiness. This holiness is not outward, but inner holiness. Through God’s discipline and all our hardships, God is sanctifying us to be holy in our spiritual lives so that we can have a close personal relationship with Jesus. 1 Peter 1:13-16 says, “Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

In Verse 18-28, the author shares where all people of God will go. The city of the living God is the final destination after finishing our race on earth. After this life and after living a life of faith, we will receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Therefore, we must be thankful and worship God with reverence and awe.

In recent months, I have been consumed with the uncertainty of my professional future because it would impact the future of my family so significantly. My mind was on how I can plan properly the next steps after completing graduate school and the unlikeliness of advancing in my current role and the unlikeliness of receiving a significant pay raise. I was fixing my eyes on myself as if I was in a tunnel. I need to do this. I need to do that. I must update my resume. I must start contacting people that I have met at school and at other companies. My mind said seek God’s kingdom first and God will provide, but my heart firmly believed that I must depend on my abilities to be successful. I might as well ask myself, ‘Jesus who?’ Fixing my eyes on Jesus was so far away from my mind that I would need a telescope. I repent of my selfishness, self-righteousness, and pride. I know the hopes and dreams of this world are temporary, but I want to live comfortably and luxuriously. As I look ahead to 2016, I pray that I can fix my eyes on Jesus and persevere in faith and seek first God’s kingdom no matter what because living for God’s glory takes away worldly worries and gives eternal hope.

Based on today’s passage, how did we run the race of faith this past year in 2015? What will the race look like in 2016? Are we fixing our eyes on Jesus and living by faith? Are we living for the heavenly kingdom? Living a life of faith is hard, but it fills us with heavenly joy of sharing in God’s glory. Fixing our eyes on Jesus can start simply from 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. It says, “Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

May God guide us to run the race of faith with perseverance by fixing our eyes on Jesus, so that we may have the full measure of his joy.