FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

Hebrews 12:1–29

Key Verse: 12:2

“…fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scoring its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

 Do you ever get exhausted? Our physical bodies need rest. But our souls need rest and renewal too. In today’s passage the author likens Christian life to a race we have to run. Running can make us very tired. To run a race we need what they call “endurance training.” For a marathon it takes 3–5 months of training. For a full and faithful Christian life it can take much longer. It’s in our nature not to want to suffer. We like to relax and take it easy whenever we can. But if we stop struggling spiritually, we won’t be able to endure in the race of faith. For this reason the author encourages us to fix our eyes on Jesus. What does that mean? How can we really do that? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

 Look at verse 1. It starts by saying that we’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. What does it mean? The author is referring to all the heroes and heroines of faith mentioned in the previous chapter. The Greek word for “witnesses” is our English word “martyr.” Many of these people died for their faith. But what does it mean that we’re surrounded by a great cloud of them now? “Great cloud” means so many of them; it also implies how great they were, far above this world. The author even says in 11:38 that the world was not worthy of them. All these great people of faith are not just old stories from long ago; they still speak to us, even though they’re dead (11:4). They’re cheering us on to the finish line. Their great examples inspire us to keep striving to grow in faith.

 So since we’re surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, what should we do? Read verse 1b. Here the word “hinders” literally means a weight that can be tied to us. Runners all know that they have to run light. Even a small amount of weight can make a big difference. We all have things that weigh us down spiritually. It might be discouragements, or negative thinking, or maybe just life’s distractions. Throwing these things off means putting them behind us. It means getting laser focused on what we should be doing spiritually. The author also mentions “the sin that so easily entangles.” Where is this sin? It might be around us, in the form of temptations; but it is also within us, in our own sinful nature. We can so easily give in to sin and get entangled in it, and it can really ruin our race of faith. What should we do about it? We should “throw it off.” We should get rid of it like garbage. To really do it, we have to be decisive and determined. Without getting rid of everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, we can’t even begin the race of faith.

 The author also says, “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” What is this “race marked out for us”? It’s the race of following our Lord Jesus. Basically, it means following in his steps. It’s not a sprint that’s over quickly; this race requires “perseverance.” Suffering for a little while might be okay, but suffering for a long time is really hard. The author has already mentioned our need for perseverance. He said in 10:23 that we should “hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.” He said in 10:25 that we should not give up meeting together. He wrote in 10:36, “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.” In 11:27 he reminded us of the perseverance of Moses during his wilderness training. Living the Christian life requires such perseverance during hardships.

 But what does perseverance mean? The Greek word is “hupomones” and it means steadfast, constant and patient. Perseverance requires commitment and faithfulness. It also requires being tough. As the famous American football saying goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Actually, when the going gets tough, many people drop out and fall way. As we’ve seen repeatedly throughout our study of the book of Hebrews, believers experiencing hardships can “drift away,” “turn away,” “fall away,” “throw away” or “be carried away” (2:1; 3:12; 6:6; 8:9; 10:35; 13:9). Instead, we need to stay the course, persevere. The Greek root word for persevere is the same as their word for “endure,” and this word is used three more times in this chapter (12:2,3,7).

 How can we persevere and endure? Basically, we need encouragement. 3:13 says, “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” We also need to be encouraged by God’s promises, which give us his hope as an anchor for our souls, firm and secure (6:17–19). We’re encouraged when we remember how during the days of his life on earth our Lord Jesus cried out in prayer and was heard by God (5:7).

 But there’s an even greater form of encouragement we need. What is it? Read verses 2,3. The greatest encouragement we could ever have is the example of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. It says he endured the cross. How? His secret was that he was thinking about the joy set before him—the hope of heaven, of going back to his Father God, of sitting at the right hand of the throne of God. It’s commonly true that when we think of a good final outcome, we can endure whatever we may have to suffer now. It’s the key to motivation to see the goal, the reward, something wonderful to hope for. Without that goal in mind, the suffering becomes meaningless. What am I suffering for? That’s a powerful question. A mother suffers in labor pains in order to give birth to her baby. A student suffers through hard studies to get his degree and hopefully enjoy a better life afterwards. Athletes and musicians endure hard training to become excellent and successful.

We don’t just suffer for our ambitions. We human beings all have various kinds of sufferings to go through, such as health problems, financial problems, or family problems. In addition to that, we suffer as Christians. What is this additional suffering we have to take on? Verse 3 says it’s “opposition from sinners.” It’s the same suffering our Lord Jesus endured on the cross. On the cross sinful people rejected, insulted, humiliated, wounded and abandoned Jesus. And what did he do? He endured; he endured it all. It’s so hard to endure bad treatment from people, maybe even more so than physical pain, but Jesus did. Verse 3 says we can “grow weary and lose heart.” In Greek it literally says “weary in soul.” Experiencing constant opposition from sinners can make our souls weary; we become spiritually exhausted. But when we consider, or think about, or meditate on our Lord Jesus on the cross, we are greatly encouraged. His love for God to endure and give his life in that way is so inspiring.

This is why the author calls Jesus “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” There were many men and women of faith before him. He’s last on the list. How could he be the “pioneer of faith”? Jesus “pioneered” the way of faith through his humble obedience unto death, even death on a cross (Php2:8). His reverent submission to God on the cross perfected the way of faith for us all. Through faith in him, we are also being made perfect. What an encouragement that is! 10:14 says, “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” Learning the faith of Jesus on the cross is what being made holy is all about. When we think too much about people and our situation, we can get so discouraged. But if we look at Jesus on the cross, our whining and complaining, our excuses, our calculations and efforts to escape are all melted away.

Read verse 2 again. The key here is “fixing our eyes on Jesus.” It implies that it can’t be a once-in-a-while thing; it’s got to be at the core of our daily living. Moment by moment, no matter who we’re with or what is going on, we need to fix our thoughts and our eyes on Jesus. The more we look at him and consider him, the more we can be inspired, the more we can endure, the more we can persevere. According to verse 4, the more we fix our eyes on Jesus on the cross, the more we can also persevere in our struggle against our sin. Our Lord Jesus shed his blood to set us free from sin, and as we remember that, we really want to struggle against our sin.

In verses 5–13 the author goes on to encourage us to accept God’s discipline. Basically, discipline is a sign of God’s love. Just as human fathers discipline their children, God disciplines us. But God’s discipline is much better. Human father’s discipline is limited and may not always turn out for our good. But God’s discipline keeps coming, and his ultimate goal for us is to share in his holiness. Read verse 7. When we experience any kind of hardship, we should accept it as part of God’s sovereign will and work in my life, as part of his personal love. And we also need to remember the outcome. Read verse 11. As they famously say in the South, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” But the key is to accept God’s discipline as his best love and good purpose in my life. Read verses 12,13. God’s discipline makes us spiritually stronger, and it heals.

In verses 14–17 the author tells us how to live together, encouraging one another to be holy and to live in the grace of God. He also reminds us of the bad example of Esau, Jacob’s twin brother in Genesis. He was sexually immoral and godless, and very physical. Because he only wanted to enjoy physical things at the moment, he could not be trained by God to be a useful man. His bad choice could not be changed even with tears. When we suffer, we need to remember the value of it as God’s blessing.

In verses 18–24 the author contrasts the mountain in Exodus 19 with our heavenly hope in Jesus. The old mountain was dreadful. Our new and holy Mount Zion is joyful and wonderful. It’s the place for all God’s precious and holy children, where our Lord Jesus, who shed his blood to be the mediator of our new covenant, is waiting for us. What should we do with this heavenly vision? Read verse 25. We need to really listen to God. And read verse 28. We need to really thank and worship God with reverence and awe. By listening to him and thanking and worshiping him we can persevere.

Read verse 2 again. May God help us fix our eyes on Jesus on the cross and inspire us to run with perseverance the life of faith. May God also help us to encourage one another to embrace our cross with the glorious hope of heaven.