

Sermon for Lent Midweek 4
March 7, 2018

“Enduring the Christian Race”

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from Jesus, the author of your faith. Amen.

Dear Christian racers, what’s the most tired you have ever been? The end of a race, or the end of a basketball game, or after a wrestling match? Maybe after giving birth, or having surgery, or at the end of the main calving week.

For me, it was after I had my cancerous thyroid removed, and a number of weeks later it was time for the radioactive stuff to make sure there was nothing left. The radioactive iodine is very targeted, so it wasn’t much, but when I got home and went to bed, I slept for 20 straight hours. I was awake for almost 4 hours, and then went right back to bed and I didn’t have any trouble falling asleep.

I don’t know what your most tired time was, but being tired and tired out is no strange thing in life – we get tired after working hard, or tired from being sick, or tired from being stressed out.

And feeling tired and being tired out is also no strange thing for us as Christians. Just as our bodies need rest and food in order to perform well throughout the day, our faith needs food and rest in order to keep going.

Christian living is hard. The devil, the secular world, and our old, sinful self work hard against us to drag us down, trip us up, and wear us out so that we give up on God.

Do you ever feel like your faith is just plain worn out and too tired? Why does the Bible describe the Christian life like a race, and why does it seem to be much more like a marathon than a sprint? Running races is where the Greeks came up with the word “agony” that described the feeling of being exhausted, out of breath, hurting, cramping, losing vision, and straining to finish a race.

What do you do when saying no to sin is too hard, and when showing the love of Christ seems to far? What do you do when your faith is gasping for air but the devil is still on your heels and you can’t let up, but you also can’t find the energy to keep going?

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus!

When I was a cross country runner in high school, it was common advice, “Keep your head up. Look where you are going to go, not where you are.” And it’s true, you run faster and feel better when you look at your goal up ahead.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus!

Better than a finish line up ahead, Jesus isn’t a mental trick, or a good tip, or a way to dig down deep and find strength in yourself. Jesus is power and fills you with strength to keep living your life of service to him.

See what Jesus did for those who went before us. We’re surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, gave sacrifices that pleased God, and when his brother Cain murdered him, what happened to Abel? He’s still living in heaven. Enoch believed in God, and he never tasted death. God took him directly to heaven.

Noah was told to build an ark, though no flood had ever been built. He's in heaven now. Abraham obeyed God's commands and trusted God's incredible, far-reaching promises. He's in heaven now.

In Hebrews chapter 11, the summary is this, "And what more should I say? There would not be enough time for me to continue to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. By faith they conquered kingdoms, carried out justice, obtained things that were promised, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edges of the sword, were made powerful after being weak, became mighty in battle, and caused foreign armies to flee. Women received back their dead by resurrection. And others who were tortured did not accept their release, so that they may take part in a better resurrection. Still others experienced mocking and lashes, in addition to chains and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were tempted; they were killed with the sword; they went around in sheepskins and goatskins, needy, afflicted, and mistreated... All of these were commended in Scripture by faith."

What did Jesus do for his people? He was with them to the end, and brought their souls home to heaven with him. Jesus is with you too, the same way he was with them.

See what Jesus did for you. He's called the author of your faith. Like the author of a book, Jesus created your faith, started your faith, gave you your faith. He made you his; you can call God "My God." But Jesus doesn't just give you a start, he's with you the whole time. You might be more familiar with the translation, "author and perfecter of your faith." Here's it's translated, "author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal." To perfect something, or to bring something to its goal, you study it, practice it, doing it over and over again until you get it all the way right.

Jesus is with you now, working with you to grow and strengthen your faith, making it better and better on your march toward the ultimate goal of getting into heaven. Jesus is with you as he speaks to you in his Word, he's with you as you gives you his own body and blood in the Lord's Supper, he marked you as his own at your baptism.

See how Jesus did it! "In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people..."

Jesus put his blood, sweat, and tears into your salvation, so that he could author faith in you and set you up with a place in heaven. He was looking ahead to the prize, and the prize he was focused on was you. The joy set before him that he wanted was for you to be in heaven with him.

He prayed in Gethsemane for another way to save you, he knew how much it was going to hurt, and how shameful and disgraceful his death would be, but he never considered not saving you, not even as he was pouring sweat out onto the ground from stress as he prayed.

There was no other way to save you, and so Jesus endured the cross, disregarded its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne, from where Jesus is now bringing his work to completion. He made the payment for sin, and now he spreads his Word throughout the world until he has gathered every last elect into his kingdom.

Don't grow weary and lose heart, Christians. Jesus has gotten many others safely home to heaven, despite horrible and difficult things happening to them. Jesus has given you faith, and is with you to bring your faith to its goal of heaven, and Jesus himself knows your suffering,

endured his own suffering to save you, and he lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit now on earth and forever in heaven. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. Amen.

Text: *Hebrews 12:1-3*

Many Christians have run the race of faith, focused on Jesus.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. ²Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne. ³Carefully consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinful people, so that you do not grow weary and lose heart.