

FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

Paul Simon wrote a song called *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover*, in which lyrics of relational failure are set to a jaunty tune. Wrenching life changes are described flippantly. Hurt and humor are combined, perhaps to minimize the pain.

I don't know of any musical tribute to the ways people abandon their relationship with God, but most of us have heard descriptions (both sorrowful and flippant) by men and women who have rejected the faith they once embraced:

“Life hasn't turned out the way I thought it would....”

“My most difficult struggles have not gone away....”

“I still have unanswered questions....”

“Too many Christians are boring, or embarrassing, or both....”

I mention these things because we meet to sing a better song. We sing of the promise that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6, NIV.). We turn to the Scriptures for truth that can strengthen us to finish the course.

The text we're going to consider in this final message in the series is Hebrews 12:1-3.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The conjunction “therefore” signals the summation that draws our series of studies to an end. The stands are filled with shouts of encouragement from men and women who faced the same tough circumstances we face, who “fought the good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). God is still the same, and it is our turn in the arena to discover his faithfulness.

The main idea in verses 1-3 is the call to run the race with our eyes fixed on Jesus, to respond to the great news of the gospel, to move forward with confidence in the Spirit of God. But surrounding the central call to respond this way is some coaching advice, if you will, some instruction given for the runners. How should we make preparation to run? What of obstacles on

the way? I want to talk a bit about some of this coaching and then return to the central idea of what it means to have our eyes fixed on Jesus and run.

The first point of coaching instruction, in verse 1, concerns encumbrances.

Lightening our load

It's hard to run if you're encumbered by excess weight. What are these encumbrances? First we might note unrealistic expectations. Silicon Valley is filled with people who feel they must achieve at the highest level in every endeavor. Sometimes the unrealistic expectations come from our families. Sometimes we choose them ourselves. We expect to be good at everything, all at once, all the time. Impossible goals lead to certain failure, and the weight of such "failure" can drag us down. How can we move forward if, no matter what we do, it's never good enough?

Another weight that can keep us from running well is dwelling on the past. We look back at a fork in the road that we wish we had not taken. We regret the accumulation of brokenness. There's no way to change the past, of course. And we can't run forward when we're looking backward. If we become melancholy, drained of hope and strength because we are consumed with sorrows over past difficulties, it weighs us down and we can't run today's race.

A third kind of weight is what we might call habits of inattention. It's hard to focus surrounded by myriad distractions—always media-connected; always pursuing the newest idea, the loudest voice, the cutting edge. You may know people who describe themselves as sports junkies, news junkies, or political junkies. A "junkie" can't stop listening, caring, attending. Every new message requires a response. Such distractions are encumbrances that make runners fail.

Finally, you may know the weight of a false responsibility, a codependent relationship in which somebody else's desperation or irresponsibility weighs on you. Instead of encouraging them to respond well to God, you take on their issues, and you can't make any progress yourself. You can't hear what God has called you to do if you're in a relationship in which you have unhealthy responsibility for someone else.

Is there something bearing down on you, a weight that you're carrying? These extra weights often are not intrinsically sinful behaviors, but rather feelings, memories or responsibilities that have grown to excess. The word of God says to set aside encumbrances and run the race before us.

Exposing hidden problems

The second statement made by the coach who is preparing us to run is that we should "lay aside sin that entangles us." Though this phrase is difficult to translate, it seems to describe problems that cause a runner to trip: pitfalls or cords wrapped around one's legs. The call here is not to lay aside all sin in order to run the race—overcoming the world, the flesh, and the devil is the race itself—but to put away a particular kind of "entangling" sin.

I believe the sin that entangles, the experience of sin that trips us up most often, is sin that is masked, sin about which we are hypocritical, problems on the inside that we won't admit to. It's pretending we're a kind of person that we're not. Perhaps the issue is bitterness, jealousy, or dark lust. In my experience, hidden, unacknowledged sin is the kind of thing that is most likely to throw my life off course. Pretending such things aren't there, never acknowledging them, and never asking for help is what trips us up.

When I discover hypocrisy in myself, it's usually by one of two useful tests. One is, do I over-react when I see a sin in someone else? The other is, do I under-react when I see a sin in someone else?

If someone's sinful failure is intolerable to us, and we find ourselves on an angry, loveless crusade, perhaps it's because we've covered up the very same sin in ourselves.

On the other hand, when we see a sin in a brother or sister, we might quickly rationalize, "Well, boys will be boys." Or, "It's pretty clear you're lying to your customers, but everybody lies." This inadequate response, this unwillingness to draw near to our brother or sister and speak a word of truth, may indicate that we don't want that subject to come up because of our own similar problem. God may be asking us to take a hard look at our own inner lives. Is this something that we need to admit to?

The last coaching word is in verse 3: "For consider Him who has endured such hostilities by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Enduring hostility

Encumbrances and entanglements are conditions we can take action to change. The endurance called for here concerns problems we can't do anything about. These are attacks that come from without: barriers, hardships, buffeting, and insults that are not the consequence of our choices. These difficulties can't be avoided or modified. They must be endured.

The tendency is to want to avoid that path, to look for another way to go. But there is no other way. We can't run in place indefinitely. The path that's going to demand a great deal, the one that's going to cause heartbreak and isolation, is the path we've got to take. And our text says to consider Jesus. He had to run that path. Those are his footprints before us. He had to run, isolated from his friends, insulted, and in pain, to the cross. So we consider Jesus and say, "Yes, it's my turn to run. That's required of me."

Those who have walked long with the Lord (and whose faith is recounted to encourage us) speak a consistent word of testimony: "I was closest to the Lord in the times when I was in the most pain. When I could not meet the challenge myself, that's when I knew him best." Listen carefully to Jesus' words: "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great." (Matthew 5:10-12a.). Those who run with endurance, trusting Christ for each day's strength, embrace a great reward—in this life and the one to come.

Now let's return to the central idea: run the race, *eyes fixed on Jesus*.

Letting Jesus fill our gaze

What does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? He fills our gaze in many ways. He does so when we worship, when we attend to Scripture, when we see him in one another, when we're obeying him. Let me share three observations.

The first is the example Jesus provided during his earthly life. It's interesting that the author of Hebrews doesn't refer to him here as Jesus Christ, or Christ—simply Jesus. I believe he's inviting us to think about Jesus in his humanity, to remember how he lived when he was among us.

Remember the WWJD fad? "What would Jesus do?" got overdone and became a bit cartoonish after a while. But asked thoughtfully, it's not a bad question. If I look at how Jesus lived, what do I see? How did he treat people who abused power? What did he say to those who were arrogant and hurtful? What did he say to the downtrodden? How did he treat outcasts? Remember, his disciples requested, "Lord, teach us to pray...." (Luke 11:1b.) They asked him because they saw him draw life from the time he spent with his Father, and they wanted to learn to pray like that. An important way of fixing our gaze on Jesus is to follow Jesus the man and pray, "Lord, may the life you lived shape me."

Second, the phrase in our text, "the author and perfecter of faith," is important to note. Jesus is the beginning and the end. The Lord has begun the heart-changing work of making us men and women of faith. He has not only begun it, but he is going to finish it. We can give attention to the voice of the Spirit of God. What work is the Lord doing in me? What fear should I hand to Jesus who is present in me? What pride should I be made aware of that needs breaking? What false ideas am I clinging to? We fix our gaze on Jesus by giving our attention to the work of the Spirit within us.

The last thing to note about fixing our gaze on Jesus is the recognition that he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. His sovereignty is absolute, and no opposition can stand, whether it is arrayed against us or arising within us. Nothing will keep the promises of God from coming true. He reigns supreme in heaven above, seated at the right hand of God. We can therefore pray, "Lord, by your power bring about your plan." Our gaze is fixed on him in his majesty.

We have a race to run. All those who are cheering for us believe the best about us. Today is a new beginning! Is there an unnecessary burden we need to lay down? We're invited to set it aside so we can make progress in Christ. Is there some entangling hypocrisy that we need to speak about to God and seek help with from our friends? Is there some awareness of Christ that could renew us, proclaiming his majesty, worshiping him more fully?

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith....

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Twelfth Message
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