

“Keep Your Eyes on Jesus!” Hebrews 12:1-11

Introduction

I think it was when we were newlyweds, shortly after we were married, and we were driving at night when we unthinkingly charged into a railroad crossing with the crossing gates down. If it had been a major accident, the next day's newspaper would have reported it as a fatal accident involving a newlywed couple at a railroad crossing with the crossing gate down.

I was so engrossed in our conversation and distracted by the sight of my wife in the passenger seat. It was night so it was dark, and I did not even notice the railroad crossing. As I entered the crossing, we were illuminated by the lights of a train coming from the left. I realized what had happened and broke out in a cold sweat. It was only God's mercy that saved us.

No matter how wonderful a thing may be, it is dangerous to take our eyes off what we need to concentrate on. We must focus on what is most important. How about you? What are you focusing on? Today's Scripture encourages us to keep our eyes of faith on Jesus and to persevere with encouragement and strength.

Hebrews 12:1-11

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

⁵And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

⁹Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?

¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

There are three points to be drawn from this passage of Scripture. First, let us cast off burdens and sins that get in the way as we run the race of life. They are hindrances to our walk of faith. Second, let's keep our eyes on Jesus and continue to build our lives on the gospel. Focus is important. Thirdly, even if there are battles and suffering, it is the discipline of God the Father who loves you. Therefore, it will surely bear wonderful fruit in your life.

So, let us (1) cast off our burdens and sins, (2) keep our eyes on Jesus, and (3) persevere in the discipline from our loving Father.

1. Cast off burdens and sins

The author of Hebrews says, "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." The image is reminiscent of the ancient Olympic Games of the Mediterranean world in the first century A.D., in Greece.

Think of a race in a stadium. A large crowd is cheering for the winner. Athletes are running as fast as they can. They run patiently, never giving up. The sight is beautiful, powerful, and inspiring.

Brothers and sisters, walking in faith and living purposefully is as beautiful as an athlete running in a stadium. It is something valuable that inspires others. Keep running with perseverance and never give up. You will be rewarded. Even if everyone does not receive a gold medal (in the ancient Olympics, they were only given laurel crowns that would die in a few days), it is a wonderful thing.

However, there is one important condition for this. Athletes must focus on competing, abandoning all unnecessary things for the sake of victory. As such, we must discard all weight and sins that cling to us. Athletes who run in a race never carry their luggage and merely imitate running. For example, no matter how much money they have with them, they leave it all in the locker room and run light.

The term "clinging" refers to a condition in which clothing clings insistently to the body, making it difficult to run. No matter how beautiful and pleasing to the eye, it is impossible to compete in the 100-meter race wearing furisode (a long-sleeved kimono).

I remember when I was in high school, a friend and I snuck into the pool at night to swim in our workout clothes. It was not a very good swim. The clothes absorbed water and became heavy, my body was dragged downward, and I felt as if my arms and legs were tied up. The sun had already set, and it was getting dark, so I took the plunge and stripped off everything. What a relief it was to feel so light. I felt as if I were a fish, even though I am not a very good swimmer.

What is being referred to here as weights and sins are all the things that seem important and beautiful to us, bringing us joy and strength, but which disobey God and eventually cause our lives to fall apart. Everyone has weights and sins. The author is not referring only to some leaders or those who are especially persecuted. Everyone carries burdens or weights in the race of life and are consumed by the sins that cling to them.

Last month at the Beijing Winter Olympics, the issue of doping (use of banned substances) by one of the world's best skaters came under scrutiny. It was heartbreaking that she was only 15 years old, but it also highlighted the depth of guilt that surrounded her, her coaches, her team, her organization, and her nation. Winning on such a big

stage gives one a sense of purpose and joy in life, great prestige, and large rewards. It can even inspire the entire country (politically and economically) as well as the people around them. But instead of gaining fame, their lives are ruined, and they are despised and treated like criminals.

The sins that cling to you are the things that benefit you and seem to have a positive outcome, but that are really poisons. It is similar to how doping is the abuse of a common drug that works wonders if properly prescribed to the sick. No individual sins are pointed out in these verses, but lying and deceitfulness, for example, are common methods used to protect oneself and to control communication and relationships.

But, while lying and deceitfulness may seem useful for the moment for self-preservation, it is ultimately an evil that leads to distrust, severs relationships, and corrupts your heart. Let's examine ourselves. What is in our own hearts?

The people of faith mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11 are by no means infallible. Abraham walked by faith, but at least twice he told lies that endangered the lives of his wife and family. He tried to protect himself, his family, and his property by pretending to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, that his wife was his sister. However, the lie was exposed, and Abraham was exiled.

That is why people like Abraham, called "witnesses," who walked by faith, are cheering us on. They do not just yell loudly for us. They are witnessing how they suffered pain when weights and sins clung to their lives, how they spread harm, and how they experienced the wrath of God!

Yet, they are also testifying of repentance and forgiveness, their restored relationship with God, and how the grace of forgiveness has worked in their hearts and lives. Please take a close look at their faith walk from the Bible. And let us cast off all burdens and sins that cling to us and weigh us down.

2. Keep your eyes on Jesus

By the way, the word "witnesses" in verse 1 can also be translated as "martyrs." They are so called because they walked by faith and surrendered their lives and all they had to God. Of course, there were martyrs who were persecuted and literally lost their lives. However, the only martyr who is the ultimate witness for God and who can bring salvation to all mankind is Jesus Christ. That Jesus is cheering for you.

So, keep your eyes on Jesus. Keep your mind on Jesus.

12:2, 3. ² ". . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

Keeping your eyes on Jesus means keeping your gaze firmly and trustingly fixed on him without getting distracted. Just as it is fatal if you look away while driving, if you do not focus on Jesus in your walk of life, you will lose heart and become weary. Perhaps we are looking at too many things that seem good, and by doing so, we fail to see what is truly important.

Rahab the prostitute was introduced as one of the champions of faith in chapter 11, verse 31.

11:31. "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies."

Hearing the story of the Lord delivering and leading Israel, Rahab began to ponder who the real God is, and she thought about what she should do. She began to look at God with the eyes of faith. Therefore, even though she was in imminent danger, she did not fall into self-preservation, that is, she left her burdens and sins behind and acted by faith. She was saved from perishing, in spite of the fact that she had lived her life as a prostitute!

Look at the amazing grace of the Lord, the merciful God who saved a simple prostitute who had sinned repeatedly. What does the author of Hebrews say about Jesus whom we are to gaze upon? He is "the author and finisher of our faith," the One who "endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before Him, and was seated at the right hand of the throne of God," the One who "endured the rebellion...of sinners."

In other words, Jesus is not merely a model of faith (a pioneer of faith) for us to emulate. He is the one who completes and perfects the race of faith that we run. As Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, he endured the abuse of those who rebelled against him.

Matthew 27:39, 40. "And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."

But Jesus rose on the third day, took up His throne of glory at the right hand of God to rule over all, interceding for those who believe, offering the grace of the gospel and completing the plan of salvation. Jesus never betrays those who believe in Him. Let us persevere since He protects those who look to Him and trust in Him amidst all our trials and suffering.

The women's marathon at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics was a most emotional event. More than 20 minutes after the gold medal winner crossed the finish line, the final runner, Gabriella Andersen, entered the stadium. The large crowd stared at her with bated breath. Dehydrated and dazed, she staggered and nearly collapsed as she crossed the finish line. She managed to finish the race in 37th place, receiving loud cheers and applause for her never-give-up attitude.

Brothers and sisters, let's keep our eyes on Jesus. He is the One who gave His life for you, the One who was resurrected on the third day and is alive, the One who will save you and complete the restoration of this world, the One who controls everything and loves you.

3. Persevere in the discipline from our loving Father

But then, why do we give in to sin? Why is it that we cannot persevere?

12:4-6. ⁴In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

⁵And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

The main reason you are defeated by sin is NOT because of your weak willpower, lack of biblical knowledge, or lack of prayer. It is because you are not fully immersed in the love of God the Father. The Lord disciplines those whom he loves. Being filled with God's love, the Father's love, is the secret to overcoming sin. Take heed! The heart that is not filled with God's love will become a den of sin.

The approach of trying to control oneself by one's own will power or by the law is not successful. As a result, when we sin, we become self-loathing and we try to separate ourselves from God. When we succeed at something without sinning, we become proud and make the mistake of self-reliance. Success may also cause us to sin by looking down on and judging those who do not succeed.

Generally, children who are deeply loved by their parents from an early age are confident, kind to others, and love others through healthy relationships. However, it is found that children who are prone to outbursts of anger and fighting, and who have poor relationship-building skills are often those who have been raised in a strictly legalistic, commandment- and morality-centered home, rather than one in which they experience deep love from their parents.

God the Father is lavishing His love on you, His children. Open your hearts and receive the Father's love once again today. Yes, God will discipline us, his beloved children. Just as athletes need to be disciplined in their training, so we need God's discipline.

Do you want to receive only affection without discipline? That is not possible. Discipline that involves suffering and endurance is the gift of love. Jesus, the firstborn son of God, also suffered. It is because he is loved. If you are enduring suffering, turn your heart to the love of Jesus, the love of God, and the love of the Spirit.

12:10, 11. ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

As the Bible says, even the discipline God gives us is not pleasing to us and something we want to avoid. But God the Father shares His holiness for our benefit and allows us to bear the fruit of righteousness and peace. This means that He restores us to the wonderful nature that we are meant to have as children of a loving God. This, beloved, is true self-realization!

I had a very encouraging and gratifying experience the other day. It was a very deep, thought-provoking episode just at the time when the budget was not approved at the congregational meeting last week. Two children brought me an offering that they had been giving each week during the online worship service. They took a tenth out of their own allowance each week for a long time and gave it to God. Of course, they would have been trained by loving parents and challenged by the Word of God. This is an example of partaking of God's holiness.

Let us cast off our burdens and sins, keep our eyes on Jesus, and persevere as we are disciplined by our loving Father.

