

## HEBREWS 12:1-3 • DISCIPLESHIP ENDURANCE TRAINING • DEL SHIMANDLE • 5/30/21

Good morning, First Free Church, all of you in-person and online.

In the next few weeks we'll be going through a new sermon series exploring aspects of the theme: "Urban Mission & Discipleship." Our church's mission statement is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ locally and globally by proclaiming the Gospel in Word and deed."<sup>1</sup>

We have several guest speakers lined up, and I am opening up the series today with a look at Hebrews 12:1-3, in which we will see how to be disciples who endure in our faith. The Bible tells us that we have everything we need for life and godliness<sup>2</sup>, and this passage will help us with our discipleship endurance training.

Over all, the Book of Hebrews was written to Christians who were wavering in the faith. It was not only common during the period for Christians to experience persecution, but also the Church struggled with the influence of pagan and worldly philosophy which caused them to drift away from authentic Christian belief and practice. Hebrews was written to exhort tired and discouraged Christians to endure in their commitment, so they might experience the fullness of God's promises.

Endurance, huh? Well, I don't know about you, but I'm tired and sometimes discouraged. I'm tired of the anxiety over the world health pandemic, the frustrations of virtual meetings instead of face-to-face contact with family and friends. I am discouraged by conspiracy theories and the polarization in society and in our churches. I'm tired and discouraged by the challenges our own church has faced, wondering: "how many of us are really left?" and "Will our church survive?"

Sorry. I don't mean to shock you. I'm just being real. Some of us are tired or discouraged. It's okay to admit it. So I do. But I am not without hope! Winston Churchill was famous for giving speeches during WWII that addressed the terrors of the war head on, and yet which helped his hearers feel hopeful and fortified. In his first speech as Prime Minister, just before the Blitzkrieg, he said: "It would be foolish to disguise the gravity of the hour. It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the first three verses in Hebrews 12 fuel that hope and provide challenge to never give up. They clue us in on the importance of our attention. That is, what we look at, what we focus on, what we fix our eyes upon. Here we see that if we are going to be disciples who run the race of discipleship with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://firstfree.com/about-us/our-mission-frame/>

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 1:3-11

<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Erik Larson, in *The Splendid and the Vile*, p35. The full speech may be read here: <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/be-ye-men-of-valour/>

endurance, we need to do three things: we need to look back, we need to look forward, and we need to look beyond! Don't jump to any conclusions, though. This is far more than just an A-B-C formula, a list of things to do. This isn't just about what we know or do.

### **Read Passage and Pray**

Let's read the passage, then I'll pray, and then I'll explain what I mean about looking back, looking forward, and looking beyond. I'm reading from the New International Version translation. The text will be on the screen, but I encourage you also to have a Bible of your own with you, and open with me now, so you can read along...

- 1 Therefore,  
since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses,  
let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,  
And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,  
2 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.
- 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners,  
so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

This is God's Word. Let us be thankful to God for it. Let us pray.

Our Father, speak to us this morning from this text of scripture. So many things in the world around us conspire to make us weary disciples, but we do not want to give up. We do not want to quit, but we need fresh nourishment from your Word so that we might endure in obedient faith. Lord refresh in our memories how you have worked in our past, focus our attention on the finish line in the present, and give us clearer vision to see Jesus, our Savior, that we might be disciples who run this race of discipleship with endurance. And now, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.<sup>4</sup>

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

### **Looking Back to The Faithful** (v. 1a, cf. Heb 11)

So, how exactly does our attention affect our endurance? What difference does what we look at make in being a disciple who endure? What do I mean when I say we have to look back, and look forward, and look beyond?

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 14:19

It's in the text! The very first thing we read in verse 1 is: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." The word "therefore" means he is referring us back to what he had just said. Some of you might know, that the previous chapter to these three verses is sometimes referred to as "The Hall of Faith." That's because Hebrews 11 highlights several heroes of the Faith in the Bible. To understand chapter 12, we are first instructed to look back at, or to remember, the highlights of chapter 11, some of those faithful ones in the Bible who, imperfect as they were, put their faith into action! In other words, we look back to the faithful ones who have gone before us, so that we might have inspiration and courage for our own race of discipleship!

In chapter 11, we read of Abel, Enoch, and Noah. There are several verses that extol Sarah and Abraham, parents of Isaac, the father of Jacob, whom God made into the family of Israel that would bless the entire world and ultimately provide a Messiah in Jesus! There are several others as well, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, and King David. But rather than dig into chapter 11 now, I'd like to tell you some stories about heroes of faith from our own church history!

**[Slide 1]** Oak Street Swedish Free Mission was founded in 1880 by Swedish immigrants. They gathered together in a Chicago home for Bible study, sharing of the Lord's Supper, and equipping each other for Gospel mission. In other words: for the purpose of discipleship! J. G. Princell served as the first pastor of what we now call First Evangelical Free Church. His energetic work as pastor and spokesperson for the Free Mission movement resulted in his being considered the "father" of the Evangelical Free Church of America. And it wasn't all tea and cupcakes! There was tension about theology and practice that threatened to pull this and other churches apart in the Free Mission movement. But Princell was one of those who helped disciples endure!

**[Slide 2]** Here is the invitation to the church's very first meetings, in 1880! This card was handed out like a sort of pamphlet, inviting people to attend a prayer meeting. The card is in Swedish, but in English it reads:

**PRAYER MEETINGS**

At No. 90 Milton Avenue

Every Tuesday night at 8pm

And every Saturday night at 8pm

Come! All are welcome.

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that every one that believeth on him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The word of the Lord can save your soul

If you want, If you want.

**[Slide 3]** Here is a photo of the charter members in 1920, 40 years after the church started. Notice the fellow in the upper left. That's C.M. Holm. Those first prayer meetings were held in his living room at 90 Milton Avenue! And here he is 40 years later! Now, that is endurance!

**[Slide 4]** Here's a story about urban mission and discipleship. Church member, Hans Von Qualen, cast the vision for sharing the Gospel with other immigrants. Remember, Von Qualen was an immigrant himself. The Scandinavians had faced their own challenges in coming to America. When Chinese immigrants who had been come to the US as cheap labor for the building of the trans-continental railroad, they were looked down upon, and cast aside once the railroad was completed. They flocked to cities like Chicago. Von Qualen understood their plight, and his heart was sensitive to their need. He said: "We found several Chinese who wished to learn about the Bible and the God of the Bible, especially when we offered freely to teach them English in order that they might be able to read the Bible."

**[Slide 5]** Von Qualen met two Chinese immigrants, Siu Yu Chi (later known as Eugene Sieux) and Ng Shek Hing (later, John Lee), and began to tutor them in English, and shared the Gospel with them.

**[Slide 6]** After Sieux and Lee became Christians, the three men went to Hong Kong as missionaries in 1887. Eventually this new Free Mission project established its first church building in 1937. And the Evangelical Free Church of China is still a growing movement, with over 2,000 churches!

**[Slide 7]** Rev. John Lee went on to pioneer creative urban ministry models in Hong Kong and Canton, and established many more churches there.

**[Slide 8]** Rev. Sieux returned to Chicago and served for six years as pastor of the Chinese Christian Union Church with its school and mission, which is still active today. Later he opened a restaurant near Halsted and Madison, worked as an evangelist part-time.

**[Slide 9]** Also in the 1890s, church member, Ingeborg Wendell caught the vision for mission in China as well! Our church commissioned her and sent her to China not long after Von Qualen, Sieux and Lee.

**[Slide 10]** Ms. Wendell initially established the Ju Tau Mission School. And her legacy has endured, and today in Hong Kong there is still an active church named Canaan Wendell Memorial Church, and a primary/secondary school that bears her name as well!

There are so many more stories about discipleship and mission, we could go on for hours! We could talk about Jok Wel and Ajang Bol who founded HELPSudan in 2005, Arloa Sutter and Breakthrough Urban Ministries in 1995, Mark Wittig and the Crisis Pregnancy Center in the 1980s, and many others.

That is the first point and application for us from Hebrew 12:1-3: Look back! Look back at those who have gone before us and be encouraged. We don't look back like the doubting Israelites who wanted to go back to Egypt, because they thought slavery there would be easier than following the LORD across the desert. No! You must look back to remember others who faithfully endured, so that you can run the race of discipleship with courage as well.

### **Looking Forward To The Finish Line** (v. 1b-2a)

But we don't ONLY look back. We, too, need the encouragement, the inspiration. But then we also must turn our attention to our own actual race! We have to look forward to the finish line. This is the hard part. This is the doing of the task in front of us. This is the discipline in discipleship!

My son, Josiah, is on the track team in his high school. Have you ever been to a track meet? Maybe you've seen some track events watching the Olympics? It's remarkable to watch the athletes as they prepare. They walk around with intensity in their eyes, stoking their emotional energy, stretching their limbs and warming up their muscles. They take off their watches, any jewelry, hats, and so on. They wear clothes that are as light as possible, and as minimally designed as possible. There are no collars, no cuffs, no frills. Just tank tops, shorts, ankle socks, and incredibly light shoes with metal spikes. They strip down to the bare minimum. Only the essentials that will help them win their race. They don't want any added weight, anything that will create wind drag and slow them down. Runners become hyper-focused on the efficiency of movement and they strip away anything that gets in the way. And when those racers line up they have laser focus on the path in front of them. The gun fires, BANG!, and they're off! Sometimes Ruth and I will be right on the side of the track as Josiah comes around on his lap in the 4x400 and we're yelling our heads off: "GO JOSIAH!" But when we ask him later if he heard us, he usually says: "No." How could that be!? I mean, I can yell pretty loud. But he's focused! He doesn't want to let anything distract him from his race!

And THAT is what Paul is saying about discipleship in the rest of verse 1!

“let us throw off everything that hinders,  
and the sin that so easily entangles.  
Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,  
fixing our eyes on Jesus...”

Like a coach speaking to the runner on the track before a race, Paul is saying to we who follow Jesus: “GO JOSH! GO DREW!” GET RID OF THE DISTRACTIONS!” This is the discipline in discipleship! Focus on the finish line. It’s not the time to think about the clothes you wear, or your fancy shoes. It’s not about stitch in your side or the ache in your calf muscle. You FOCUS on the finish line! You focus on your stride, on your breathing, on your posture! And any coach worth his salt will tell you don’t dare turn your head to look at the other runners. The Christian life is not even a race against others! You’re racing against your own self, your own pride and will and sin.

That’s right. Your sin habits are a distraction in your life of discipleship, friends. It’s in the Bible right here, in verse 1. You must throw off the sin the so easily entangles if you want to endure in the race of discipleship. Notice that the question is not: “Will I stumble?” or “Will I sin?” Rather the question is “will I get back up, refocus, and keep running?” Christians are not perfect people. We are forgiven sinners! Don’t get me wrong, scripture tells us we will be, in fact we are being, transformed from our sinful nature. Scripture calls us to live holy lives, and here in Hebrews 12 to run the race with endurance. But scripture also acknowledges that we are still prone to wander!

And this passage tells us two things about that. First, throw off the sin that gets in the way of discipleship and spiritual growth. You are wrecking your own spiritual life! It is not worth it. Second, when you do fall, this is not the time to think about your failures and screw-ups. On the track you won’t win the race in front of you by obsessing over how you came in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>, or even last in the previous race! In the Christian life of discipleship you won’t run with endurance if all you can think about is your past mistakes, even if that mistake was five minutes ago.

Get back up, and get back in the race! Confess, repent, and get up, stop sinning and run!

That is how it was for some of the heroes that Hebrews 11 told us about. Of course, we are encouraged by their acts of courage, but they were all flawed characters too! They got tangled up in sin too! Take King David, as just one example. Sure, he triumphed over Goliath, he ushered in the so-called “Golden Era” for Israel. But he also stole another man’s wife and then had the man killed! You can’t get much more deeply flawed than that. And yet, the Lord himself calls David “a man after my own heart!”<sup>5</sup> How can that be? Well, it’s because David was quick to confess his sin and repent. And, rising again, he refocused his eyes on following after the Lord!

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22

That is the second point and application for us from Hebrew 12:1-3: Look forward! Discipline your self for the race! You must focus with laser intensity on the race in front of you! When you're tired or discouraged, or even if you fall, get back up, and get in the race!

### **Looking Beyond To The Founder** (v. 2a-3)

At the beginning I said: "This is far more than just an A-B-C formula, a list of things to do. This isn't just about what we know or do." But so far it does sound kinda like a formulaic to-do list! 1) Look back to the faithful to be encouraged, and 2) Look forward to the finish line and be focused.

Well, we do have a task to do! There is no mistaking that this passage describes the Christian life as a long-distance race that requires effort on our part and great endurance. There's no reason to expect spiritual health would not require discipline and exercise in the same way that our physical health does. So if you expect things to be easy, think again.

The good news, however, is that, though our effort is expected, the race doesn't depend upon our own effort! Look at the text!

let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,

[HOW?]      2 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.

3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners,  
so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Verse 2 tells us that Jesus is object of our faith, as well as the supreme model, that is the pioneer, or the forerunner, of how to live in faith! In other words, point three is this: We don't only look back to the faithful before us, we don't only look to the finish line in discipline, but we also look beyond to the founder of our faith.

Let me say it again, Jesus is not only a model of how to live, though He is that. But Jesus is also the object of our faith. And that is because He is the one who completed it, the one who fulfilled the requirements. Did you ever wonder what it means when it says He was the "perfecter of faith"? The word means He completed, or accomplished what was required!

You ask: “how did he do that?” The text tells us that too: he died on the cross, turning the values and expectations of the world on their head, and then sat down at the right hand of God. He sat down, because His work was finished! His work on the cross cleared the path of faith so that we could run in it! One Bible commentary puts it this way: “The ultimate basis for endurance, therefore, [is our] new-covenant relationship with God’s superior Son and an ongoing openness to God’s Word. In other words, one’s endurance ultimately will depend on the health of one’s relationship to Christ and faithful obedience to the Word.”<sup>6</sup>

So, the ironic thing is, if you want to be like Jesus, focus less on being *like* Him, and more on being *with* Him! *IN* Him! Romans 8:10-11 puts it this way:

10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

That’s encouraging news about enduring in a life of discipleship. Give long, deliberate focused attention to Jesus, who endured more opposition than you or I will ever know, and in THAT way, you will not grow weary, and you won’t lose heart.

Earlier in the book of Hebrews, chapter 2, the writer said about Jesus: “10 In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ... 18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. 1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus.” (Heb. 2:10, 18, 3:1)

Please, my friends! “Do NOT throw away this confidence; for it will be rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised!” (Heb 10:35-36)

Do not flag in your faith! Don’t be deceived by the conspiracy theories, don’t be lured by the promises of power in politics. Don’t stay stuck in sin habits and patterns. Don’t quit coming to fellowship with one another in church. Throw off everything that hinders you in discipleship, stop doing the sins that so easily entangle you. If you would run the race of discipleship with endurance, then fix your eyes on Christ, the one who has gone before and cleared the path for your race!

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<sup>6</sup> NIV Application Commentary, p. 36-37

Earlier I said that the Book of Hebrews was written to Christians who were wavering in the faith, tired and discouraged by troubles both outside and inside the church, just like us today. To encourage and undergird his readers, the writer of Hebrews provides a detailed explanation of who Christ is. These three verses in chapter 12 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ. So my challenge to you is this: as a way to fix your eyes on Christ, commit to reading through the entire book of Hebrews this week! It can be done in a single sitting in about an hour for an average reader. Or, there are 13 chapters, so you could read 2 per day and finish in one week. It doesn't matter how you do it, but just do it! As you read pray, and ask God: "Who is Jesus? Help me, God, to know Jesus!" There will be parts you don't fully understand, but don't be troubled by that, for there is plenty that you will understand. And if you continue to read scripture and pray and listen, you will understand more and more.

A.W. Tozer said: "The one who would know God must give time to Him!"<sup>7</sup> So I say, if you want to endure in discipleship, fix your eyes on Jesus Christ by spending time WITH Him every day this week. It's a small price to pay, and if you fix your eyes on Him, you will be able to endure.

Let us pray.

Our Father, thank you for your word, especially that portion we have wrestled through this morning. Help us, O Lord, to look back in order to be encouraged, help us to look forward toward the finish line in order to be disciplined, and help us to look beyond, to you, O Lord, so that we might know you more intimately, and thus run with endurance.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> *The Divine Conquest*, A.W. Tozer, p. 22