

*Mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance. (Jude 2)*

Hebrews 12:1-3

*Prayer: O Lord GOD, my ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. Amen (Job 42:5,6)*

Imagine this scenario: you are one of the hundreds of athletes competing at the XXI Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, Canada. You are in the competition of your life. Your event: the 50 kilometer Cross-Country Skiing Classic. This event separates the men from the boys, the women from the girls—this is the highest level of intensity. 50 kilometers of grueling twists, turns, and tumbles. The course is brutal and the whole world is watching. What will motivate you to fight for the gold? In the midst of bumping elbows with competitors and struggling to the finish, how will you stay focused? Without a reason to press on toward the finish, what's the point of competing at all? We need a reason to endure. The reality of our Christianity is much the same. God has placed each one of us into the competition of our lives. It's a contest with eternal consequences and it is grueling. We are often distracted by so many things in life and so many people want nothing but to pull us down, so we can't finish the race. The Lord Jesus promised the path would be difficult and he is watching us—but he gives **The Reason to Endure**.

### **1. Consider the race marked out**

First, consider the race marked out. God in his divine wisdom has placed a path before each one of us. It's a race marked out for you personally by God. Your race may look very different from my race. You might have a factory job, a spouse of twenty years, and a house that needs your attention. You might work in a library, coach basketball, or come home to two cozy cats every night. Yet, despite our differences we have one thing in common. The race marked out for us has heaven as its end. We are racing to the finish line in Christ and through Christ. But there is another outcome for those who reject Jesus. There is the broad road that leads to destruction. There is no prize for them, only death.

Those who first received this letter to the Hebrews were in terrible danger of traveling down that road to destruction. They were tempted to fall away from their faith in the crucified Christ and to return to their old Jewish ways. Life would have been so much easier for them that way. If they just turned from the cross, then they wouldn't incur the shame and disgrace of their blood relatives and all their old friends. Those original Hebrew readers had started running the race in Christ with passion, but they lacked persistence. For a time their eyes were enlightened to see Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. But when the race marked out for them became difficult, they started listening to Satan's lies. They were tempted to turn aside and take what they thought would be the easy path of life. But throwing aside Christ crucified will lead to only one end: eternal destruction.

So, the writer to the Hebrews encourages us, "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." We learn two important points about sin in this section. First of all, sin hinders us. It hinders and prevents us from living the life God wants us to live. There is a path God has marked out for us. Yet, Satan comes and whispers in our ear: "That sin doesn't lead to destruction. That's the path of fun and excitement. God is just trying to keep you from really enjoying life." It's the same lie he told Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Serpent tempted Eve. "Go ahead eat the fruit. You won't die when you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact," Satan said, "God knows you'll be like him. God is trying to keep you in the dark about life and

what real enjoyment is all about.” So, sin acts as a weight or a burden. It keeps us from being the people God wants us to be.

**Consider the race marked out** for you. God has given you things to do and people to serve in your life. What holds you back you from serving them and loving them? What prevents and hinders you from reaching out to those people who need you? It is sin. The sin of selfishness keeps us from loving those around us and looking to their needs first. “I’ll help them when they help me,” we say. The sin of apathy prevents us from hearing God’s Word regularly. The proof of this comes when we have convinced ourselves that we’re too busy to spend time in Jesus’ word. “I’ll have more time for that later.” The sin of laziness keeps me focused on what I can’t do or what I think I can’t do—and suddenly I find I haven’t done anything at all. And piled on top of them all, the guilt of sin weighs me down. Sinners have guilt and shame. Left to ourselves there is no getting rid of it. And so, sin hinders. Sin keeps me from living the life God has marked out for me.

But we learn a second thing about sin in these verses. Sin easily entangles. We have a race to run, not to stroll or walk feebly. But what easily gets in the way as we run with perseverance? Sin does. You don’t have to look very deeply into life to see how sin entangles. That one little lie you told to your friend means you had to tell it five other people, just to keep your bases covered. Satan works his sneaky lies the best when sin entangles us. We might even buy the lie, “This is an exception. Every other time this happens, it’s a sin. But with me, this is not a sin. It’s okay.” From cheating to stealing to hurting others to disrespecting authorities, we can become masters of entanglement. And somehow, we manage to explain it all away, as if it’s no big deal. But it is a big deal. It keeps us from running the race God has marked out for us. It leads only to death.

## **2. Consider the cross endured**

As Christians, we want to throw off that sin that entangles and hinders us. But how will we toss it aside? How will we find the strength to get rid of such miserable sins? Simple: **Consider the cross endured.** There you and I find the reason to endure, there you and I find the strength to run with perseverance. On this Wednesday of Ashes, let us cast off our sins and put them on Christ.

Hebrews says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” As we strain for the finish line and battle against our sinful flesh, we see our Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. In essence and fact, he’s the Captain of the team. He started the team and authored our rescue plan. God loved us before time began, and he planned our salvation in Jesus, his one and only Son. Not only did he author the plan, he also completed the plan. He’s the perfecter of our faith. He perfectly followed everything in our place. Our sins were laid on him and he paid for each one of them. He not only knew how to start the contest for our souls, but he finished it.

Christ Jesus endured opposition from sinners. He suffered brutally at the hands of the elders and the soldiers. He accepted the plan to save sinners. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup [of suffering] to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done” (Matthew 26:42). God’s will was done, as Jesus endured suffering. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus suffered the pangs of hell itself. There he prayed, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” **Consider the cross endured**, because that is the reason to endure in our lives. The sinless Son of God, the author and perfecter of our eternity, was put to death for us. He considered the joy of saving sinners and scorned the shame of the

cross. Even though everyone who hung on a cross was cursed by the world as a criminal, Jesus did it for you and me. He underwent capital punishment, so that we would be forgiven children of God.

When we put our sins on Jesus, we see we are not the first to do so. “Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything.” The chapter immediately before our lesson for tonight in Hebrews 11, the heroes of faith chapter of the Bible. The believers of the Old Testament are surrounding us. In fact, the believers of the past 20 centuries are watching us. They ran the same race of faith in Christ. They cast all their anxiety and sin on him and trusted in his forgiving love. According to Hebrews, they are the fans in the stands, cheering us on to the finish line. They’re shouting to you, can you hear them? It’s your mother or father, your aunt or uncle, your first pastor, your grandma or grandpa, your best friend. They’re cheering you on: “By the grace of God, we made it! We finished the race in Christ and him crucified! By his grace, so can you!”

They once were where we are now: sinner-saints struggling to keep the course. But now they are where we, if we persevere, will be: covered with white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb. They are living evidence of God’s grace. They are the saints triumphant in heaven. One day you will be too. God in Christ gives us the reason to endure. **Consider the race marked out. Consider the cross endured.** And may all of this, throughout the entire season of Lent, empower you to “fix your eyes on Jesus... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” AMEN.