

Endurance – Our Spiritual Marathon

March 20, 2022 based on Hebrews 11:32-12:3

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Please read Hebrews 11:32-12:3 before going further in this transcript. Running 26.2-miles is not easy. I now know this from personal experience, because I actually attempted to run my first marathon last fall, the Blue Ox Marathon. That's me, wearing the number 1222, and that's the medallion they gave me on the left. However, due to Covid restrictions, they gave out the medallions before the race even started, so getting the medallion doesn't necessarily mean that I actually finished the race. (We'll come back to that.) I decided to try my first marathon for several reasons. One reason is that I'm now in my 50s and I realized that it was probably going to be now or never, if I ever wanted to try a marathon. However, I must admit there was another, more driving purpose behind entering the race. And here it is: I was SO sick and tired of this Covid pandemic! You see, one of the healthiest ways that I've found to manage my personal stress is through running. So I ran. A lot. In 2021. But I wasn't just running to manage my stress levels, I was also running to prove to myself that something good could come out of Covid. Now, even though I had a compelling motivation to run this marathon, that didn't necessarily make it any easier. And, that didn't guarantee that I'd finish. So, I trained *really* hard.¹ I ran hundreds of miles. I bought multiple pairs of socks and shoes and energy snacks and other equipment, including a camel back – which is that red vest thingy that I'm wearing in the picture (You'll need lots of water if you plan to run 26.2 miles!) I read books on marathons, including the "Complete Idiot's Guide to Marathon Training." Then I applied what I was reading to my workout regimen, my eating habits, my recovery plan.² All of this was designed to help me develop the endurance that I would need, to run 26.2 miles. But what about "Our Spiritual Marathon"? How do we develop the endurance that we need to follow Jesus for a lifetime? Today's text gives us two strategies for developing spiritual endurance.



¹ 1 Timothy 4:7-8 says, "...train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." The day of the actual marathon puts all your training to the test. You find yourself saying, "I wish I would have trained more. I wish I were more prepared. I wish I'd lost a little more weight." I hope that this is one of the helpful lessons that God is teaching us from the Covid pandemic, "train yourself to be godly." Covid may prove to be a picnic compared to what comes next in our world. There's no way of knowing, but if we made the mistake of not being spiritually well-prepared for the changing chaos of Covid, let's not repeat that mistake when the next stress test comes.

² Once I reached my longer training runs (10+ miles), I even learned to take ice baths. Which are exactly what they sound like, a bathtub filled with ice water that you immerse your body in. Don't knock it until you try it!

First of all, spiritual endurance is developed by...

1) **Imitating the faith of other believers.** Today's Scripture reading began with Hebrews 11:32, "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about..." And then verses 32-38 give us a rapid-fire list of success stories and stories of suffering.³ Successes like conquering kingdoms, shutting the mouths of lions, and quenching the fury of flames. But also sufferings like being tortured, facing jeers and flogging, and being put to death. In other words, Hebrews isn't just cherry-picking success stories, it's highlighting the endurance of those who served God faithfully through thick and thin.⁴ Hebrews 11 records an incredible history of godly men and women who made it to the finish line of their spiritual marathons. It's only a partial list, but it's representative of the many faithful men and women who lived out their faith to their very dying breath. If you scan through Hebrews 11, you'll find a phrase that's repeated over and over again: "By faith." So what empowered the spiritual endurance of these men and women of old? Simply put, their faith in God.⁵ Hebrews 11:39 summarizes it this way, "These were all commended for their faith..." In other words, FAITH is one of the vital keys to spiritual endurance. Learning to imitate the faith of those who've gone before us, is one of the best ways that we can develop the endurance that we need, to run "Our Spiritual Marathon."

As we consider the list of names in Hebrews 11, it may cause some of us to reflect on more modern-day saints. Not necessarily names you'd find in the Bible, but names you'd find in northern Minnesota. Godly men and women who have lived and walked among us. Each one of us probably has at least a few names that come to mind: Names like Richard and Ruth, or Don and Mabel. Names like Bob, or Barb, or Bonnie, or Charlie. I could go on, but it would take a while to list all of them, and even longer to articulate the reasons why their particular faith, is commendable, much like the faith of those mentioned in Hebrews 11. If you're taking sermon notes today, I urge you to write down any of the names that come to your mind. And as you write down those names, jot a quick note about what made their faith particularly commendable. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." So let's imitate those who've been commended for their faith in Christ, not only those who are listed in

³ Or we might say triumphs/tragedies or peaks/valleys. Verse 35 shifts from the successes listed in verses 32-35 to the sufferings listed in verses 35-38. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2517 footnote on Hebrews 11:35b-38.

⁴ Verses 35-38 record "those who experienced temporal suffering, not temporal triumph. Yet their steadfastness was itself a triumph of faith." (O'Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 442). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.) So "if godly examples from the past maintained their faith in the midst of severe affliction and persecution, then let the listeners persevere in the face of lesser suffering." (O'Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 446). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

⁵ See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2082 footnote on Hebrews 11:32-38.

the Bible, but also those who've run their race during our lifetimes. Let's follow their examples of Christlike spiritual endurance.^{6 7}

Now, a few of these names listed in Hebrews 11 are rather surprising examples of faith.⁸ But the fact is, "None of the people mentioned in chapter 11 were faultless, but they [demonstrated true faith nonetheless]."⁹ Jesus is the only perfect example of godliness. At best, the rest of us are examples of godliness in progress, and that's ok. There is tremendous value in learning from the mistakes of others, particularly when they demonstrate godly repentance and restoration. In other words, even as we wrestle with our own sin and imperfections, that can become the godly example that others need. Then we can all learn together, how to endure through our failures and shortcomings.¹⁰ The imperfect lives of other believers who have persevered and finished the race, leave us a clear testimony, that endurance is indeed possible for us as well.

There's a particular phrase in Hebrews 11:34 that really struck me this week, "...whose weakness was turned to strength...." You see, the faith of these ancient believers wasn't commendable because they were such strong and confident people. On the contrary, the key to their spiritual endurance was that they looked to God for their strength, not to

⁶ By the way, there are many people who are still alive today, who are also godly examples for us to imitate. The fact is, you don't have to be elderly to demonstrate a commendable faith. 1 Timothy 4:12 reminds us, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." Indeed, how many of us older saints, stand to benefit from the example of younger believers, who are zealous for the Lord, and exude a passion for Him? That's why it's such a blessing for us to spend time together with other generations; we have a lot to learn from each other. We can inspire one another toward spiritual endurance, toward running hard after Jesus. Our church believes in becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus, TOGETHER.

⁷ This idea of "imitating those who've been commended for their faith," is one of the reasons why online church falls short. Church is NOT about a building, but it is a gathering place. It's a gathering place where we rub shoulders, where we look each other in the eye, where we live out our faith together side by side in the trenches. A key way to mature and develop as a follower of Christ is to imitate the godly examples all around us. This is something that you just CAN'T get from livestreaming. We are so blessed by ministries like our Choir, SS classes, Life Groups, Senior Connections, Bible studies, Kids Ministry, Youth Group, handbells, 2nd Sunday Prayer, and many more. We need to be around each other so that we can rub off on each other, learn from each other, and imitate each other's best spiritual qualities. This is a key strategy in developing spiritual endurance. Deuteronomy 6:5-7 says it this way, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." One author actually goes so far as to say that "modeling and copying are NOT optional. They are CENTRAL to how we make spiritual progress together in the local church." (Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2014, p. 106.)

⁸ Some of the people listed in Hebrews 11, made some pretty poor choices, "but they acted in faith at critical times in serving God's purpose." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2517 footnote on Hebrews 11:32.

⁹ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2517 footnote on Hebrews 11:32.

¹⁰ "Your congregation needs to see progress, not perfection. Jesus already has perfection covered." Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2014, pp. 106-107.

themselves.¹¹ This is one of the things that remains UNchanging: the ancient's endured by looking to God for their strength, and so should you and I.^{12 13} The Apostle Paul explains it this way in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, "But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Brother or Sister in Christ, this has not changed; spiritual endurance is not about our strength, it's about putting our faith and trust in His strength.¹⁴

With all of this in mind, Hebrews 12:1 goes on to say, "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."^{15 16} This phrase, everything that hinders, should cause us to consider even the good things in our life that might be hindering our faith. These are not necessarily sinful things, but rather things that we just don't need to keep around. So, for example, when I was preparing for my marathon, I tried to be very selective about my running equipment. When you're going 26 miles, you want to travel light. All I really needed was a lightweight set of running clothes, a good pair of shoes, and some water and a few energy gels. Everything else was just extra weight, which would only serve to hinder my progress.¹⁷ In a similar way, in our spiritual marathon, we should avoid bringing along a bunch of extra stuff that we don't really need, baggage that just slows us down and hinders us. This probably means something a little different for each one of us, but most of us are likely already aware of some of the things we need to get rid of.¹⁸ And if you're not aware, ask the Lord to show you this week.

¹¹ This is where a spiritual marathon is markedly different from a physical marathon.

¹² "Faith is the response of all who are conscious of their own weakness and accordingly look to God for strength." O'Brien, P. T. citing Philip Hughes, (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 442). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹³ "They were not mighty in and of themselves; rather, through faith they became mighty in battle. 'Conflict did not weaken them, but was the occasion on which they became strong.'" O'Brien, P. T. with partial quote from Koester, (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 442). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹⁴ Hebrews 11:1-2 says that this is what ancients were commended for, not for being great and strong, but for exercising confident faith in the LORD.

¹⁵ "They are not spectators but inspiring examples. The Greek word translated 'witnesses' ... means 'testifiers, witnesses.' They bear testimony to the power of faith and to God's faithfulness." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2083 footnote on Hebrews 12:1.

¹⁶ "The key verb of the exhortation in verses 1-2 is let us run: it is expressed by a hortatory subjunctive rather than an imperative, as our author adopts a pastoral tone and identifies himself with his listeners. He too needs to press on and persevere." O'Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 452). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹⁷ "The verb for 'putting off' was used literally for the removal of clothes and figuratively of all kinds of habits and hindrances." O'Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 451). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹⁸ The *ESV* translates verse 1, "lay aside every weight." And I've got to admit, I wish I'd lost a few more pounds before my run. I carried every ounce of me for 26.2 miles.

Verse 1 also mentions, “sin that so easily entangles.” Here’s another thing that hasn’t changed in our world: humankind’s ongoing struggle to resist sin. The ancients struggled with this just like we do, and we can persevere just like they did. We do this by repenting of any sin in our lives, by laying it aside, so that we can experience God’s forgiveness and grace. And then, we will be in much better condition to run our race well. Laying aside these entangling sins would be impossible, were it not for Jesus. This leads to our 2nd strategy for developing spiritual endurance.

Spiritual endurance is also developed by...

2) Fixing our eyes on Jesus. Verse 1 leads right into verse 2, “...And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 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.” We fix our eyes on Jesus because He went before us.¹⁹ He pioneered the way for our salvation, and He perfected our faith by enduring the cross.²⁰ Jesus got the job done! He opened up our access to God so that we could gain entry into the spiritual marathon. And He perfected and finished our faith, so that we now have all that we need to persevere.²¹ ²² In other words, Jesus’ endurance on the cross empowers our endurance in the spiritual marathon.²³ THAT is why we need to “fix our eyes on Him.” And NOT fixate on the problems in this world. We are “looking to Jesus” because we rely on Him, for the support and help that we need to finish our race.²⁴ ²⁵

¹⁹ “fixing our eyes” ἀφορώ = “① to direct one’s attention without distraction, fix one’s eyes trustingly.” (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 158). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

²⁰ “According to the second half of the antithesis, this same Jesus is the perfecter (teleiōtēs) of faith. The word teleiōtēs refers to ‘one who brings someth[ing] to a successful conclusion, hence perfecter.’

(O’Brien, P. T. (2010). The Letter to the Hebrews (p. 454). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

²¹ To put it another way, Jesus didn’t just set a good example for faith, He “opened the way to God and enables us to follow in his footsteps.” O’Brien, P. T. citing Peterson, (2010). The Letter to the Hebrews (p. 454). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

²² “That is, the beginner and completer of faith – the One who went ahead of all believers in their faith and led on to its definitive goal.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2083 footnote on Hebrews 12:2.

²³ “endured the cross. The expression refers to his positive action of persevering to the end rather than his passive acceptance of death.” (O’Brien, P. T. (2010). The Letter to the Hebrews (p. 456). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

²⁴ O’Brien, P. T. (2010). The Letter to the Hebrews (p. 453). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

²⁵ “When believers, who are still running their race, fix their eyes on Jesus and rely on him for support and help, they know that he is the perfecter of faith who is seated at God’s right hand, having endured the cross and shame for them. His exemplary fidelity is underscored so as to encourage them to persevere in faithfulness.” (O’Brien, P. T. (2010). The Letter to the Hebrews (p. 458). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

What about this joy set before Him though? Hebrews 12:2 goes on, "...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." This "joy set before him" is "His glorification at the Father's 'right hand.'"²⁶ So after Jesus endured the cross, He was then raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand. He sat down because His work of salvation was finished, and this brought Him great joy. Joy, because His work was finished, but also joy, because He was looking forward to sharing this salvation, with us.²⁷ This is the victory that we will celebrate on Easter morning, but it's also the victory that we have for today. You see, when Jesus completed His race, He didn't sit down because He was tired. Not at all. Jesus sat down at the Father's right hand and then continued actively working on our behalf. 1 John 2:1 reminds us that "...we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ." This makes it clear then, that even though Jesus has completed His own race, He has not forgotten about all of the other runners.²⁸ In other words, our spiritual endurance should be inspired by the image of Jesus advocating for us, even cheering us along. He has not forgotten how hard it is to run a spiritual marathon. He knows, from personal experience. Jesus is at the right hand of the throne of God, not as a casual observer, eating popcorn in the stands, but as an advocate. He's an active participant in our spiritual perseverance. We might picture him standing on the side of the racecourse, shouting out words of encouragement, "I'm with You! I've got you! Keep going!"²⁹

Hebrews 12:3 wraps up today's passage, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."³⁰
³¹ In these crazy, chaotic, ever-CHANGING times that we live in, it's easy to grow weary and lose heart! That's why God's Word addresses weariness

²⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 2083 footnote on Hebrews 12:2.

²⁷ See John 16:19-24.

²⁸ This reminds me of one of my favorite scenes from the book of Acts. Ironically, it was one of the most tragic days in the life of the Early Church; it's the scene where Stephen is stoned to death. We get a glimpse of just how actively Jesus is watching over us. Acts 7:55-56 says, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." It's strange that Stephen would say that Jesus was standing. The whole point of Him being seated was that His work was completed; His work on the cross was finished, so He sat down. So why's He standing up? Bible scholars debate the significance of what's going on here. For me, this seems to indicate that Jesus is actively watching over His followers.

²⁹ In addition to the Father and the Son working together from heaven, we also have the Holy Spirit within us, who comes alongside to empower us during our race.

³⁰ "The imperative consider follows the participle of verse 2, 'fixing our eyes on', and heightens the appeal... The verb rendered consider ...means 'to reason with careful deliberation'." (O'Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 460). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

³¹ The very fact that verse 3 mentions not growing weary, seems to indicate that there's a definite possibility that some of us might. So, if we're struggling with weariness, we're in good company, because some of the first people to read the book of Hebrews must have been struggling too.

head on, and urges us to avoid it, by considering Jesus. Specifically by considering how He endured opposition in His own life. Jesus faced incredible opposition during His earthly ministry. He was opposed by both the Romans and the Jews. He was opposed by one of His 12 closest followers. He was even opposed by some of His own family members. And yet, He endured > THAT is why we should carefully consider His example of endurance. Jesus endured even unto death.³²

Last fall, when I was attempting to run 26.2 miles, there were certainly times when I grew weary. While most of the course is relatively flat, there are a few hills, and those hills can be brutal; they can cause even the most seasoned runner to lose heart. I found the race particularly challenging when I got right around to mile 20 or so, because my knees started giving out. And that's when I came to one of those hills and I had walk up it. I remember praying, "Lord, if my knees go out, there's no way I'm going to be able to finish these last 6 miles. Please help me." In our spiritual marathon, we all reach occasional points of discouragement. At certain times, things in life just pile up to the point where we're not only feeling weary, but we're beginning to lose heart, like our knees are going to buckle right under us. It's at points like these, when we can lose our resolve and fall into despair. We become so fatigued and exhausted that we feel we just can't make it to the finish line.³³ Have you ever felt this way? I know I have.

There are SO many things in this life that can cause us to grow weary. We are living in unprecedented times, with SO many changes all around us. And all of this change is wearing many of us down. But we need to keep in mind that God is UNchanging. In fact, in the very next chapter, Hebrews 13:8 reminds us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." So as we strive to navigate all of the changes going on in our world today, we need to remember to hold fast to our UNchanging Jesus. We need to fix our eyes on Him, so that we will not grow weary and lose heart.

³² See Philippians 2:8.

³³ "The concern of the author of Hebrews is to inspire his listeners to run with endurance so that they do not collapse before reaching their goal. There seems to have been 'a weakening of resolve and a failure of nerve' on the part of at least some within the congregation." (O'Brien, P. T., citing a phrase from Peterson, (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 461). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.)

Well, before I wrap up, I should probably tell you whether or not I actually finished my marathon. By God's grace, I did indeed run the full 26.2 miles and crossed the finish line! This picture is a little deceptive though. I know I'm smiling, and I seem victorious, but about 3 seconds after crossing that finish line, an extreme wave of emotion overcame me, and I just began to weep. You see, all that morning I wasn't really sure whether I'd make it or not. Yes, I had trained long and hard. And yes, I was determined to finish. But the sudden reality of knowing that I'd actually made it to the finish line was SO overwhelming for me, because until that point, I honestly wasn't sure that I was going to make it. And I wonder if some of us feel that way about our own spiritual marathon? We've trained long and hard, followed Jesus for years. We're determined to finish our spiritual race. BUT, for one reason or another, we've grown weary, and we've begun to lose heart. Maybe we've even begun to question whether we're really going to make it or not. If you're feeling that way today, I'd encourage you to meditate on today's sermon text. Remind yourself of the godly examples of those who've gone before us. Remember that they endured by faith, the same faith that is available to you. Remember that God turned their weakness to strength. Remind yourself to fix your eyes on Jesus. If He is for you, what can stand against you? He is at our Heavenly Father's right hand, at this very moment, cheering you along, all the way to the finish line!

