

FOCUS

Introduction

Typically, at the beginning of January we all talk about New Years resolutions for a week or so and then conveniently ignore them for the rest of the year.

We see the beginning of the year as a new and fresh start, a new beginning, maybe a reset where we can leave old habits/problems/struggles and move forward with a fresh outlook. So although we may not necessarily state that we are making a “resolution” we still have hope for the new year, that things will be different. We experience this on a smaller level each birthday, month, week, even day! We subconsciously can think that a new period of time can mean that things will be different, and we (if maybe unofficially) commit ourselves to make sure that they are.

Well, now it's February, and many of us have realized that 2018 us is the same as 2017 us. In fact, we probably realized that within the first week or two. We have been faced with the reality that our verbal/mental commitments don't always work out because frankly, we aren't able to keep them. Or maybe we have experienced enough years that they seem to just snowball, and we don't start each year with new hope, it's more like “well, here's another one.”

You may be tired already. Maybe literally, physically tired, but maybe spiritually tired. Maybe you started this year thinking that it was going to be different, it was going to be the best year of your life, you were going to serve the Lord, pursue him, and it was going to be awesome, but now it's February and you feel much as you did when you made those mental commitments to yourself.

The timing for this message is one that I feel can tie into our relationship with Christ. As we settle into the routine of life, even following a strong commitment or experience, the day to day aspect of following Christ can leave us feeling uninspired or exhausted. If asked to describe your relationship with Christ, you might say that you're tired, if you're being honest. That may just be where you are. You've fallen back into old habits, you don't have the “joy of your salvation,” and you just feel tired.

The message today is going to be endurance, spiritual endurance. I hope that it is challenging to you on some level but that ultimately it is encouraging to you as you lean into the power of the Lord for the encouragement and strength you need to endure in our Christian walk. This may not be a “new” message for you. It may not reveal some new, amazing theological truth or tickle your intellectual fancy. More than anything it may just be a reminder, but a reminder that I think we all need (myself included).

Self Reflection

Are you tired? Exhausted even? Do you feel spiritually dry and like you are far behind where the Lord wants you to be? Can you not believe that it is only February,

or are you exhausted by how fast the year is going? Consider if that describes you and where you are.

Consider whether your life is one marked by joyful endurance, or if you feel like you are walking through quicksand, sloping downward into exhaustion and spiritual dryness. **Whether you couldn't get to church fast enough this morning, or you had to drag yourself here, I hope the Holy Spirit uses this message to encourage you.**

Foundation

First, the gospel. If you are here and you are not saved, first I am so glad that you are here! This is a wonderful thing for you to experience and it is my hope that you will see how with the Lord as your savior you can experience strength through him to endure and persevere through the ups and downs of life. There is such freedom in surrendering your life to Christ, where it no longer makes sense for your hope and joy to be dictated by your circumstance! We are empowered by the gospel to live a life that is marked by perseverance, so without it we cannot hope to achieve spiritual endurance.

Second, I am NOT talking about endurance from a worldly perspective.

Oftentimes the lines between spiritual endurance and regular endurance are blurred. Spiritual endurance is not something we can conjure up out of our will and ability. Our problem isn't going to be fixed by liking and sharing the right post on facebook, or seeing the right quote/picture combination on instagram. The idea of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" doesn't apply here.

Last, we are also not talking about endurance through self-inflicted trials.

Sometimes, the "trials" you are going through are simply the result of you making bad decisions and suffering the consequences for those decisions. The Lord can use those situations to help you to grow, but you must understand that the main point there is that you would repent and learn from that situation. Wanting endurance through the trial while stubbornly refusing to learn the lessons that the Lord has for you is like saying "hey will you help me? Great. I don't care about you or your plan for my life, just your help."

Mark 14:26-42

We are not going to spend a ton of time here, but I think this is a relatable, narrative example that we can use to illustrate the struggle that we go through to move from a bold declaration of intent to acting on what we've said we'll do.

There are really so many examples from Scripture that we can use to illustrate the struggle of endurance. From Abraham, to Moses and the children of Israel, to David, we see struggles to endure, stick to what we say and believe that God is going to keep his promises. In this specific example, the irony is that they had just finished the last supper, and so it would be safe to say this is kind of a mountain top experience for the disciples. This is actually when the Lord's Supper (communion)

was instituted. But immediately following this Jesus does something odd. He says “you will all fall away.” Of course Peter is emphatic that he won’t leave him, ever, and the rest of the disciples agree. Then Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him and in obvious distress, simply asks them to watch while he prays. As soon as he returns, they are asleep. He wakes them, but two more times they fall asleep and have to woken by Jesus. Even though they’ve talked about how committed they are to Jesus, they are overcome by the mere physical need to sleep.

Here Jesus says something profound, which is really the crux of the issue that we have as human beings. He says, **“The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** He acknowledges their bold proclamation of commitment, but also that their flesh is too weak to endure on its own. This will be the focus of our message: how do we overcome the weakness of our flesh to be able to endure in the trenches of everyday life, beyond worship services, small groups, conferences, or “mountain top experiences” that can cause us to make bold commitments to the Lord that we struggle to fulfill in our own strength. How do we endure?

Background on Hebrews

We don’t know who wrote Hebrews. Some people say it was Paul, but there is a lot of room for debate. Some other names are Timothy, Apollos, Luke, Barnabas, but we really do not know for sure. Regardless of the author, one of the main themes that we see throughout the book of Hebrews is the Old Testament in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ – using OT language to describe Christ as a “heavenly high priest” who took our sins on himself and atoned for them in a way that no other priest had ever been able to.

Context of Hebrews 12

The consistent references to the Old Testament ramp up in Hebrews 11, where the author goes through the generations of Old Testament characters, the consistent thread being the faith they had in what God had promised he was going to do. This is an amazing passage that you should read in depth but I will summarize it briefly. It begins with the famous verse from Hebrews 11:1 – **“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”** This is not a reference to who you are going to marry, where you are going to live, how many kids you are going to have, if NC State will ever win a National Championship during my lifetime (in any sport), but rather the faith to believe that God will do what he said he is going to do to reconcile humanity to himself. We read of how all of these Old Testament figures “by faith” believed what God had promised and endured. Abel the son of Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Rahab, these are all people that the author of Hebrews commends as being faithful. Yes, they weren’t perfect but they set before them the promises of God and endured through all manner of trials. Let’s start reading in verse 32 of Hebrews 11.

All the way back to Abel, one of the sons of Adam, the author of Hebrews traces the faith of person after person throughout the Old Testament, how they

endured and were faithful, believing that God would keep his promises. And this sets up chapter 12.

Hebrews 12

As we unpack it I don't want to lose the picture that the author of Hebrews is painting. Namely, the connection between the Old Testament, the New Testament, and us today. I want to break this passage down into three main points: **Our heritage, our example, and what holds us back from enduring.**

Our Heritage

Hebrews 12 opens with this picture of an arena with people watching us run a race that they themselves have already run. **"Such a great cloud of witnesses."** Now, we don't necessarily believe that people in heaven are literally looking down and watching us, there isn't really support for that biblically, but the as we consider those that have gone before us, in should inspire us to "run our race" with renewed vigor.

This introduces a metaphor that is common in the New Testament: athletics.

Paul in particular uses many athletic metaphors in his epistles, and in Hebrews there are repeated references to "running a race." We understand that the "race" is the pursuit of Christ with our lives, and that we are the athletes competing in this race.

Because of this, let's introduce you to a hypothetical runner. Picture him in your head. We're going to use this mental image as we move through the passage.

We see from the outset that we do not live in a vacuum in 2018 America. We have the Old Testament heroes, the early church, the church now, who have been persecuted, who have suffered, and died in faithful service to God. From the beginning of time we have lineage of brothers and sisters "of who the world was not worthy" that have suffered and died running the same race that is set before us now. With Jesus, we are blessed to have more of the picture than they did before Christ came and revealed the good news of the gospel, but we still look forward because all that God has said will happen has not happened yet. We must keep running the race that is set before us. Thankfully, we have not been left without an example.

Our Example

In verse 2, we see that we can look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He is our example. Look for a moment at what allowed Jesus to be able to endure taking on the sins of the world and enduring the cross, despising the shame. It says that Jesus, for the JOY that was set before him was able to endure. **For the JOY that was set BEFORE him.**

This example presents us with a very important principle for endurance: **our joy comes from what is before us.** Do you feel sapped of joy, kind of like a zombie just wandering through religious activity and the life you live from day to day? Consider whether you are expecting to find joy in your day to day circumstances. You can try to choose joy if you want, but it doesn't matter how hard you try – you will not be able to conjure up joy from what you go through. You may find some fleeting

happiness in what each day holds, but true joy comes from the Holy Spirit as we fix our eyes on the inheritance we have in Christ. In the moment, Jesus was not able to bear the crushing weight of our sin, being humiliated on a cross by “choosing” to be joyful. He was able to endure by looking toward the joy that was set BEFORE him.

Key to endurance: know your inheritance and look beyond your circumstance.

What holds us back

So we have looked behind us at those that have gone before, and we’ve looked ahead to see what we are running towards, let’s look at how Hebrews 12 focuses on self evaluation. We can be inspired by the “great cloud of witnesses,” and understand that we look to Jesus, but we still need to identify what the things are that can hold us back in our daily lives. **As we look through the passage, we see three things that sap our spiritual endurance:**

Weights/Sinful Nature

The first is brought up in verse one. “Lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.” We can see also in verses three and four that “in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” As we look to Jesus, we consider how he was obedient to the point of the death, and what the author of Hebrews is saying, gently, is that **our main barrier to endurance is our own sin nature.** It’s helpful to identify that the source of our exhaustion is typically ourselves and the choices that we make. Most of us have not, and probably will not suffer any sort of physical persecution for our faith. It’s simply the fact of the matter.

Let’s recall that runner that I mentioned earlier. If you’ve got him or her in your head picture this: **they are running their race, and yet their feet keep getting entangled in vines and undergrowth.** Instead of stopping and dealing with them, the runner just keeps trying to run, fighting with each stride against the weeds that are entangling them. Now consider this, on top of the vines or whatever that are tripping up the runner, someone runs up to them and hands them a bag of cement. Then another bag. And another. Before they know it, they’re holding three bags of cement, their feet are completely tangled in weeds, but they are still fighting, trying to run.

How quickly would this runner be exhausted? Immediately! How can they expect to run this race well with all of these things holding them back? **If you are feeling spiritually exhausted, maybe you need to take a minute and see what weights you are holding, and what is entangling you.**

The Greek word in verse one that is translated “lay aside” is “apotithemi,” which means more that you are laying something down and pushing it away – not going to pick it back up again. It isn’t something you are just going to put down until you feel like you can pick it back up again, it’s the idea that you are done with this thing.

These weights could be many things. **Sin, obviously, is something that so easily entangles us.** But even things that are not sinful can be weights that we are not

supposed to bear! Technology, entertainment, codependent, unhealthy relationships, all of these can be weights that drain us of endurance.

Even ministry and religious activity can be weights that we may need to lay aside, if only for a time. I so appreciate how last week Jeff showed us how many people were serving and made a point to speak to those that were serving in 5+ areas in the church and say “maybe you need to lay something down.” Listen, if something, anything is dragging you down and exhausting you in your personal relationship with Jesus, you may need to lay that down. It can be helpful to do an exercise where you determine your “responsibility circle.” For a single person, it’s fairly small. You need to pursue the Lord and nurture that relationship. If you’re married, it gets a little bigger. If you’re married with kids, it gets even bigger.

The point is, there are certain things that you cannot lay down. Take stock of them. Things that lay outside your responsibility circle are optional. Treat them like they’re optional. They exhaust you to the point where you are no longer able to pursue the Lord? Lay them down.

Wrong view of trials

As we move into verses 5-11, the author begins to talk about the discipline of the Lord. Often we think of discipline as something that happens to us when we’ve done something wrong, and although that can definitely be the case, the root Greek word here is “paideia” which basically means raising a child through instruction, training, and correction. Obviously the focus here is on perseverance, but as we talk about discipline don’t just think about punishment for wrongdoing, but rather discipline that trains us through many avenues to be able to endure.

This returns us to the athletic metaphor. The Winter Olympics are going on right now, and we are watching each country send their athletes that are at the pinnacle of their sport to compete on a global stage. This is great opportunity to see the result of years and years of committed, consistent training. These athletes were only able to get to the point they are now because of persevering through discomfort. Despite any privilege or natural talent, there is an insane amount of work that goes into being the best in the world. An incredible amount of discomfort. **Training is not comfortable. Stop expecting it to be.**

We see trials as something to avoid, or if we cannot avoid it we get annoyed, angry, frustrated, or any other adverb. **But consider, how cruel would it be for God to give us no direction? Never training us, never giving us opportunities to grow, as we see in verse 7.** God trains us as his children! This training isn’t comfortable, but training is not meant to be comfortable. The great thing is, we don’t have to seek out discomfort, enough comes to us just by living life! From getting cut off in traffic, to frustrating situation at work or school, family situations or tragedies, we are given opportunities to learn to glorify the Lord through our reactions.

We typically think of perseverance and growth through trials as training only to be able to overcome greater trials, so why would we want that? I'm going to fail right off the bat so I never get to any worse trials! But look at verse 11 – the yield from discipline is not that you would have worse and worse trials (though you may) but instead that you would be able to live in peace and joy day to day – and endure what God allows in your life as you grow. Sometimes the Lord may be preparing you for something that will require great perseverance but great reward – but misery is never his goal.

Think back to our runner for a second – now not only are they holding some bags of cement and tangled in weeds, **they also have not trained AT ALL for this race** that he is running – their only movement has been from the couch to the fridge. He just wandered onto a track (that has weeds on it for some reason), and is trying to run this race with no training. No wonder they're exhausted.

Do you want to move from words to actions? Be encouraged by trials, discomfort, struggles and discipline. They are opportunities to grow and be strengthened for every aspect of life.

Spiritual Focus

The last half of the chapter moves into what our focus should be. **“Lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.” The key to spiritual endurance is the proper focus.** We grow weary because we lose focus. Consider your own life. If you don't have a goal, you grow listless and tired. You don't have anything to look forward to! It's the same way with our spiritual walk. When you lose focus you will get tired.

We cannot focus on anything here on earth if it is viewed in a vacuum. Even the best things on the planet will falter if it is not viewed in the context of eternity. **The good news is that some of these things can be enjoyed MORE since we don't have the pressure of ultimate fulfillment on them!**

We read in verses 18-29 of the kingdom that we have to look forward to, a kingdom that cannot be shaken – which stands in stark contrast to every earthly kingdom! Having this kingdom in view not only inspires us to endure, but drives us to worship in reverence and awe the God that has promised all of this for us. There are so many things in this world that can so easily distract us, that can tempt us to chase them, **but if you want to experience spiritual endurance do NOT let your focus be shaken from the Lord and his promises.**

Practical Steps

First, we must always begin by communicating with our Lord and Savior. We may need to take some time and pray for forgiveness, confessing our distractions to him, and asking him to reveal other sins and weights in our lives that we need to cast off. Then we can move to asking him for the endurance and strength that you know

you need. And do you not feel like running the race? You don't feel like enduring? Confess that to him, and ask that that desire in you would be set aflame.

Second, we need to train. Spending time with the Lord and in prayer each day, discipleship, small groups, serving, church, etc. It always seems that most of spiritual advice goes back to: spend consistent time with the Lord, in his word and in prayer, so much so that we may get tired of hearing it. The simple reason for this is IT WORKS BUT WE DON'T DO IT. It's like how there is a new diet and exercise fad every few months. Because eating right and exercising is hard, we are always looking for a shortcut. Well, the reason we stay the way we are is that we aren't willing to do what we have to do to move forward! Don't look for shortcuts.

The other aspect of training is to embrace the opportunities that we have for growth. As I mentioned earlier, we tend to run away or avoid any kind of trouble or discomfort. Don't do that! You miss opportunities to grow stronger through the discipline that the Lord has for you. Learn the lessons and consider what God has for you. Even if it is something as simple as getting cut off in traffic, to dealing with a difficult family situation, taking time to breathe and ask the Lord what he is doing can turn what seems like a bad situation into an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to grow us in our spiritual endurance.

Refocus

Take time to be still and allow Holy Spirit to minister to you and work on you. What are sins in your life that are holding you back? What weights to you need to lay down? I want to be clear when I'm talking about rest this isn't necessarily just brain dead rest but rather a time where we use Scripture, prayer, journaling, and maybe even outside sources like devotionals or discipleship relationships to help us refocus on our calling as believers in Christ.

As you pray, study, and refocus, consider the WHY behind the different areas in your life. Connect your family, ministry, career, and even your leisure to the eternal purpose we have as believers. It could even be helpful to write out verses of Scripture and put them in your car, office, or your home. Refocusing every aspect of our lives can help us cut out some parts that are unnecessary, and also cause us to have renewed endurance as we are able to see beyond our temporal situations to eternity.

Remember, you can't pour out from an empty vessel – don't wait till you are empty to be filled. Some of us try to coast by in our spiritual lives the way we drive our car. It's like we're trying to always set a new record of how empty we can get our gas tank before we fill up.

One great tool to use for this is a personal retreat. This is something that Jeff is a big proponent of, for the church staff and members as well. A personal retreat can be a day, or maybe even a weekend where you go off by yourself, with your bible, maybe a journal and/or a book, and just spend time alone with the Lord, doing a

couple things you enjoy like maybe a movie, playing music, or something, but having intentional time with the Lord as well. You can even sleep! Sleep is a great and often spiritual way to rest and refocus. I know the first reaction from many of you is “well I could never do that,” but I’d challenge you to consider how many other things you make time for, and how something like this can help refocus us on the Lord.

Be grateful for grace

Through all of this, we can be so grateful for grace. I know that life can seem like a daunting race to run, especially in a way that is going to honor the Lord. And it’s easy to run through in our heads all the times that we have fallen, all the ways we have let our sinful nature take over and hinder us from moving forward. But the Lord is so merciful and full of grace. Look back at Hebrews 11 for a moment. The people that the author mentions were not “good” or “perfect” people! In fact, some of them did sinful things that we can’t even imagine. But through the grace of God, and through his strength, they were able to endure. And you are as well. Through struggles, trials, our own sin and distractions, the Lord is faithful because this is his work in you - your endurance doesn’t come from you.

Three different people

As we wrap up, I want to revisit the three different people I mentioned at the beginning. **First, those of you who would say that you don’t feel “exhausted.”** By God’s grace you are being faithful and running well. I want to encourage you from **Galatians 5:7**, where Paul is correcting the church in Galatia. He says, “you were running well!” but they allowed false teachers to come in and lead them astray. Continue to run, continue to grow, but be wary. And care the weaker among you! If there are those in our community that are tired, exhausted and miserable, build them up! In fact Paul says in **Romans 15** that the “strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.” You can praise God for what he has done in your life, and be an encouragement to others.

Then there are those of you who are tired. You do feel exhausted, spiritually. Be encouraged by the eternal inheritance that you have in Christ Jesus – a kingdom that cannot be shaken – and that you can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a life of endurance because of the joy set before you. So lift up your drooping hands, and strengthen your weak knees! Take to heart what Scripture has to say and begin to say yes to the Lord as he calls you to run this race with endurance.

Last, to anyone here that does not know the truth of the gospel, or may think they do but has never actually confessed their sin and inadequacy and humbly surrendered their life to Jesus Christ. I just want to ask you a couple of questions. Are you tired of being thrown around by the circumstances of your life? Are you tired of the emotional rollercoaster that comes with trying to find happiness in the fickleness of this world? Do you want to have a hope that causes every hope we have hear on earth to fade? A hope for something beyond this world? A kingdom that cannot be shaken? Everything here will one day pass away – this is a fact. Your hopes and desires, they are echoes of something put there by your Creator, meant to be

focused on something beyond the shadows of eternity that we see on this earth. Through the good news of the gospel we are freed to not have to live for this world, not have to find fulfillment in its fickle circumstances. If you do not know Jesus, or need to recommit and refocus your life to him, I pray you don't leave this place without taking time to grab a friend, a staff member, your small group leader, or someone, and ask them to talk with you.

Through the gospel we are freed to run this race with endurance. Look unto Jesus and his perfect atoning work on the cross, and simply ask the Lord for the strength to carry on.