

RUNNING OUR LEG OF THE RACE WELL

Hebrews 12:1-3

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I suppose it's a result of getting older and watching my own children become adults that I find myself thinking more these days about the blessing I've experienced in having parents, grandparents and great grandparents who loved Jesus and have passed their legacy of faith to me. My last living grandparent, my mom's mom—Grandma Knepper—passed away 4 years ago in January of 2015. I was blessed that she and two other of my grandparents had opportunities to hear me preach as a pastor at McBIC. As my grandparents grew older I gained a greater appreciation for the heritage they passed on to me. As Greta and I encourage our children in their walk with Christ, it's an amazing blessing to realize we're carrying on a legacy that has been entrusted to us across multiple generations.

Back in late August there was a Sunday that fell between our summer sermon series on 2 Corinthians and a series we were preaching called, "*Helping People Connect with Jesus.*" I took that opportunity to preach a message on the subject of leadership integrity and character within the church. In that sermon I expressed my commitment to lead with integrity as your senior pastor and I challenged all of us with our responsibility to care for what God has entrusted to us as a church family. It was an emotional message for me to preach, because it's a very personal subject and one that I'm passionate about—especially in light of the frequency of moral and leadership failures among pastors in our country.

After that sermon as I was greeting people at the door, my mother came through the line and told me that I was the best son she could ever have hoped for—handsome, intelligent, kind...actually she didn't say that. 😊 She was tearing up as she said something like, "*Daddy (her father) would have loved that sermon.*" My mom's words were very moving to me, but I was curious why she had said that about that particular sermon. When I had a chance to talk with her later in the week I asked her, "*Why did you say that grandpa would have loved that specific sermon?*" She said, "*He always prayed that God would bless you with humility in ministry.*" As she said that it struck me once again how blessed I am to have had generations of godly

ancestors who have gone before me, including parents and grandparents who have faithfully prayed for me and my family.

As I thought about that conversation with my mom, I also thought about how fortunate McBIC is to have been blessed by the godly lives, faithful prayers, regular volunteer service and generous giving of so many, many people over the course of its 128 year existence. You and I stand on the shoulders of many who have gone before us. Have you ever heard the saying, “*When you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn’t get there by itself.*” You and I are like that turtle. We didn’t arrive where we are by ourselves. It’s only as we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us that we’re able to experience all the blessings God has for us.

When my mother told me how my grandfather prayed for me my mind quickly went to the passage we’re going to look at today, and I determined that when I had the opportunity, I wanted to preach on Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1-3. I’d like you to read these verses with me aloud responsively. I’ll begin reading and then I’d like you all to read the portions of this passage that are in bold on the screen...

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, 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.

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

My challenge for us as we begin 2019 is to commit ourselves to running our leg of the race well. And you don’t have to enjoy running to apply the truths I’m sharing with you today. The only times I ever really ran distance of any kind was when I was playing a sport or training for a sport. I’ve never enjoyed running, but this passage has some powerful insights for all of us.

Hebrews 12 begins with the words, “***Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...***” The word *therefore* links the “*great cloud of witnesses*” with what we read in chapter 11—a chapter that has been dubbed, “The Bible’s Hall of Faith.” There we read about heroes and heroines of the Bible like: Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Rahab,

Gideon, Samson, Samuel and David. In verses 33-38 of chapter 11 we read these words about our faith heroes...

Through faith [they] conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. Hebrews 11:33-38

The phrase, *“a great cloud of witnesses.”* calls to mind a large stadium filled with spectators—but these aren’t just any spectators, they are the people who have run the race before us. Speaking of these heroes of the faith chapter 11 closes with these words, *“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”* (Vv. 39 & 40) What does it mean when it says, *“None of them received what had been promised... only together with us would they be made perfect?”* He’s talking about Jesus. All of the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 lived and died before the coming of Jesus. They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, but none of them had a chance to experience Him. And so, the 1st Century followers of Jesus who read this letter were told that it was only through their lives that those who had gone before them would experience the reality of God with us, through Jesus.

This great cloud of witnesses aren’t passive observers, they’re fully engaged. Most of us have probably been to a large stadium at some point in our lives for a sporting event or a concert. I’ve been to hundreds of sporting events in my life—high school, college and professional and a few concerts—but when I think of an excited crowd, one experience sticks out in my mind above all of the others. I was a student at Asbury Seminary, located just south of Lexington, KY, and a friend and I went to a Kentucky versus Kansas basketball game in Rupp Arena. Kansas had beaten Kentucky badly the previous year and the Kentucky fans were pumped up. It was a Saturday night game and tickets were hard to come by. We located a ticket seller in the parking lot 30 minutes before the game and hurried to the arena. When we got

inside the place was electric. We were in the students section and stood the entire game. It was so loud that we had to yell in each other's ears just to be heard and after the game my ears hurt. Kentucky beat Kansas that night and the place was rocking from start to finish.

You may have had a similar experience with a large crowd, but the *cloud of witnesses* Hebrews 12 is talking about has a lot more invested in this "contest" than any sports crowd. The *cloud of witnesses* is engaged, because they're watching us finish the race they started, but didn't get to see completed—because Jesus hadn't come to earth yet—but they're also helping us run the race. Bible commentator F.F. Bruce says, "*It is not so much they who look at us as we who look to them—for encouragement.*" So, we're finishing the race they began, and much of our motivation and encouragement comes from their example.

The heroes and heroines we read about in the Scripture can bring us great encouragement and they help to strengthen our faith—stories of people like Joseph, David, Esther and Daniel—but the great cloud of witness mentioned in Hebrews chapter 12 also includes people we know personally—parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles and other family members and friends who have gone from this life before us. I've mentioned my maternal grandfather, but I have many other relatives who loved Jesus who are part of that cloud. And how about McBIC as a church? I'm so grateful for faithful saints from this church family who have gone before us. In the last several years I think of people like, Elsie Nissley, Esther Lenker, Ethan & Mildred Mann, Calvin Thompson, Mary Featherman and others. Many of these people supported me personally with their faithful prayers and encouragement and were a blessing to so many of us within our church family for decades.

Let's return to reading Hebrews chapter 12: "*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.***" This picture we're given of a race inside a stadium filled with a cloud of witnesses isn't just a nice, "feel good" image. The author of Hebrews is challenging his readers to run their leg of the race well. I find it interesting that the challenge we're given is not just to free ourselves from sin—that almost goes without saying, right? The challenge is also to discard everything that keeps us from running as well as we can. Sure, we're called not to sin, but we're also called to set aside anything that hinders us. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words in

Ephesians chapter 6 verse 12. He writes, *“Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”* This is a common theme of Paul and other New Testament writers. In Christ, we’re free—free from sin, free from death, free from habits and sin patterns that control us and free from legalism that says, *“You have to do this.”* And, *“You can’t do that.”* But be careful, Paul says that your freedom to do as you choose doesn’t lead to bondage. I see echoes of Paul’s words in this passage to throw off whatever hinders us.

Chapter 12 continues with the words, ***“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*** Perseverance is celebrated in our culture, but I think it’s celebrated, because it’s often so rare. Our culture teaches us to demand instant gratification. Perseverance in marriage, in an occupation, in relationships, through generally difficult circumstances and in a life-long faith journey is increasingly uncommon. That’s why the Scripture’s frequent admonitions about perseverance and endurance in the midst of suffering are so difficult for us to receive. We do all we can to avoid suffering, rather than endure and persevere through it.

And then in verses 2 & 3 of Hebrews chapter 12 we read,
“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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

The author of Hebrews calls us to focus on Jesus like a runner in a race focuses on the finish line. Jesus is our pioneer—the one who went before us—and He is the perfecter of our faith. On the cross Jesus endured shame and pain and suffering. He endured all of this for us—He was sinless, yet He carried our sins. We’re called to focus on Jesus as we run our leg of the race so that we will not grow weary and lose heart.

So, let’s personalize this for us. **What does it look like for you and me as followers of Jesus to run our leg of the race well?** I believe our first responsibility is to **express our gratitude for those who have run before us**—parents, grandparents, great-grandparents or perhaps for you it’s a brother or sister, an aunt or uncle, a teacher or coach, a youth leader or pastor. I heard someone say recently that gratitude is the most important attribute or value a person can have. There’s a lot of merit in that claim. Gratitude wards off pride and embraces humility. When we embrace gratitude we acknowledge our dependency on others and confess our

inability to get along on our own. All of us who are part of this church, we owe deep debts of gratitude to the hundreds and thousands who have gone before us—serving, praying, giving and living faithfully, so that we’re able to experience all we do today. You’ve probably heard me mention this before, but I’m frequently impressed that when this church was established in 1890 at High & Marble Streets in Mechanicsburg, the dedicatory sermon was on Jesus’ words, *“My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”* And today we enjoy the blessing of being a church with a strong emphasis on prayer as well as a church that is regularly sending out missionaries to the nations. I also think about legacy and seeds that have been sown in prayer as I watch God bringing together pastors and churches across this community to partner together over the past 2 years. We’re like that turtle on the fencepost.

I believe that running our leg of the race well also means that you and I **recommit ourselves to persevere in growing as followers of Jesus Christ who are daily being transformed more and more into the image of Jesus.** Verse 1 calls us to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. We’re called to persevere as we focus our attention on Jesus. As I talk about recommitting ourselves to perseverance in growing as followers of Jesus, what comes to mind for you? **What area of your life is the Holy Spirit asking you to submit to Him during this year, so that He can continue his work of transforming you to become more and more like Jesus?**

Finally, as we think about running our leg of the race well, it’s helpful for us to **remember that just as we experience the blessing of generations that have gone before us, you and I have the privilege of passing our faith on to future generations.** We’re part of the cloud of witnesses that Hebrews chapter 12 speaks about for generations that come after us. Hebrews 12 tells us that those who went before us didn’t get to finish the race, because Jesus hadn’t yet arrived. In a similar way, while you and I have the blessing of receiving benefits we didn’t work for from those who have gone before us, the generations that follow us will reap the fruit of our godly living, our committed service, our generous giving and our faithful prayers.