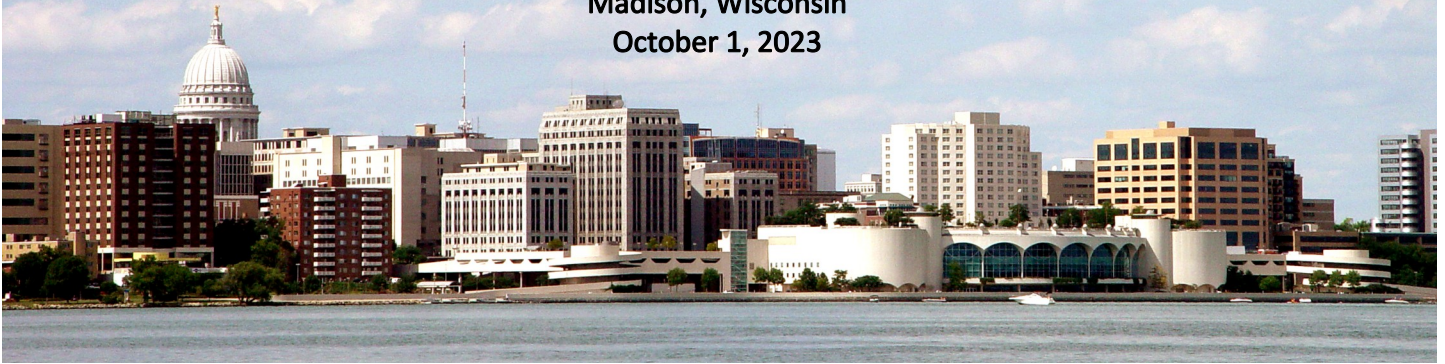


Let Us Run with Perseverance

Hebrews 12:1-2

Baxter T. Exum (#1706)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
October 1, 2023



It is good to be back in Madison this morning! I enjoyed being away for a bit, attending a series of lectures at the Bear Valley Bible Institute in Denver, camping in the mountains, and visiting my sister out in Washington last week. And it was good to worship with God's people along the way. It was good to worship without having my finger constantly on the trigger to advance to the next slide, and it is always good to have a fresh perspective as a visitor. Wherever I go, I make a list: What can we learn from what these people are doing well, and what can we learn from what these people can improve? And one thing I think we are doing pretty well is giving our visitors a way to get in touch. We may have the best visitor cards in the history of visitor cards! So, if you are visiting with us, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can (using the QR code up here or on the front of today's bulletin), or you can use one of the beautiful cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

Before we get to our study of a text from God's word this morning, we want to give just a brief overview of what God has done to save us. He sent his only Son to die in our place, to shed his blood for our forgiveness. He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up alive on the third day. We respond to this good news through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we have an example to share this morning, coming to us from Cliff Sabroe, a friend who preaches out in Visalia, California, at the West Visalia congregation. They posted a few days ago and they say, "Great morning at the West Visalia Church of Christ! Congrats to Christina Kim on her decision to be baptized into Christ!" So good to see this, and we share this picture as an invitation: If you have not yet done what Christina has done, you can do it today. Let me know if I can help in some way. My contact information is on the website as well as in today's bulletin, which is on the wall right inside the front door.

And by the way, before we move on, I do want to just mention that the West Visalia congregation has a song leader with a pink beard! I was watching one of Cliff's sermons a few months ago, and when the songleader got up after the lesson, I said, "Wait just a minute!" Maybe that's a California thing, I have no problem with it at all, but I think I'll be sticking with the white since I think I've earned it. I just thought some of you might appreciate that.

This morning, I want to invite you to be turning with me to the opening verses of Hebrews 12. At the request of one of our young adults, we've been looking at the book of Hebrews for several months now. And we've learned that Hebrews is a message addressed to some early disciples who were having a hard time listening to Jesus, they were perhaps tempted to turn back to a former way of life, so the author lets them know that Jesus is better, and he encourages them to keep on keeping on, to live by faith, to endure. In Hebrews 11, the author defines faith as ***"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,"*** and then he gives a series of examples: This is what faith actually looks like in the lives of Abraham, and Moses, and Rahab, and the others!

Well, today we move into Hebrews 12, as we come to the practical application of what we just studied in Chapter 11. I struggled a bit with the structure of today's study, but it seems to me that the big encouragement in the first two verses of Hebrews 12 is that we are to ***"run with endurance."*** And so, the Christian life is compared to a long distance run. Let's look together this morning at Hebrews 12:1-2,

¹ Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This morning, let's pay special attention to this encouragement to ***"run with endurance,"*** which seems to be the big idea here. This is what the whole paragraph is encouraging us to do, we are to ***"run with endurance."*** And as I understand it, everything else in this passage gives us either reasons or strategies for running this race that is set before us. So, let us start with the command, this encouragement, ***"let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."*** And I would just make a few observations here at the beginning, starting with the fact that this race is not a sprint, but is closer to a marathon. And I say this, because this race that we are in requires ***"endurance."***

I think most of you know that I started running maybe 2-½ years ago, right in the middle of the pandemic. I had lost some weight, and I was looking for a way to keep it off, for a way to just keep moving. I enjoy hiking, but I was looking for something more, and something I could do alone. Well, right about that time, somebody connected to the middle school where my wife was teaching at the time posted something online about a 5k to benefit the school's cross country team. The run was in memory of Michael Neill, a 16-year old young man on the cross country team at LaFollette High School, who ran at Sennett, and this young man died in a car accident at the age of 16. In his memory, his mom, Sherri, set up this run to help fund cross country teams at Sennett and Whitehorse middle schools here on the east side. Well, two years ago I thought this sounded like a good goal, even though I couldn't recall running more than maybe 30 seconds at a time in my whole life. So, I went online and found a "Couch to 5K" plan. I liked this one, because it had a lot of relaxing in it! Five minute walk, two minute run, five minute walk, RELAX; Five minute walk, two minute, run, five minute walk, RELAX; and so on, slowly increasing the amount of running over the next month or so. And I did those early runs on the sidewalk around the Wingra Stone Quarry down in Fitchburg – well lit, not too likely to get murdered, and I could go really early in the morning, when no one could see me! But before I started, I checked in with Josh and Shelby. I told Josh, "I know you're a runner, I have no idea what I'm doing, what do I need to know?" He told me to get some good shoes. So, I went to Moovin' Shoes on Park Street and got fitted by a retired Madison teacher with a PhD in exercise who's been working at Moovin' Shoes since the 70's. He watched me walk and run back and forth across the store for a while, and then he said, "This is what you need." I walked out with a new pair of shoes and went home and started running. A few weeks in, I asked Josh and Shelby for some advice on a watch that would track my distance and time. That's all I needed. They were getting ready to

move, and Shelby gave me her old Garmin. It had a pink band and it was small, but it worked. I used it faithfully until just a few months ago when the band finally had a blowout. The replacement bands were \$15 online, so I went to St. Vinny's instead and found a new-to-me watch just like like the old one, but in purple, for only \$8. So, now I have two chargers – one for home and one for the car – and my running watch is now becoming ever so slightly more manly over time!

But I kept up with the plan and did my first 5k back in July 2021. I looked up the average time for a 50-year old man, found it was around 34 minutes, and that was my goal. I think I beat it by 26 seconds! I say all of this to say something about the value of ENDURANCE. If you've never run before, there is some training involved, and it takes "**endurance**" to stick with it over time. Unfortunately, I haven't beat that time since getting COVID back in April of last year. I'm back up to moving for 5k at a time (about 3.1 miles), but I can only run for the first half and then do a run/walk combo for the second half. However, I now alternate swimming and running, and I've continued to do the 5k honoring Michael Neill and benefiting the cross country teams over here. Michael's mom, by the way, is an awesome woman and lives practically around the corner over here on Cameo, I believe. That first year, when she found out I would be over on this side of town to preach, she insisted on dropping off the shirt personally. By the way, I came over here to mow on Friday night, and I ran into Sherri and her dog on the sidewalk out here. We talked for a bit, and she was thrilled that they raised around \$10,000 this year, allowing two middle schools to compete in an actual high school tournament a few weeks ago. Most of us cannot imagine losing a child at only 16, but she is doing a great thing in his memory. I say all of this, first of all, to emphasize the importance of "**endurance.**"

The second part of the big idea, the command, in this passage, is that we must run with endurance "**the race that is set before us.**" In other words, the race that we run is not some random course that we make up as we go along, but the course of the race has been "**set before us.**" Or, to put it another way, we run our race on a course of God's choosing, not our own. There is a goal, and there are boundaries, and there are directions along the way. As Josh read from 1 Corinthians 9 in today's scripture reading, like Paul, we must run in such a way that we "**will not be disqualified.**" With that first 5k being during COVID, they offered a virtual option, and since the race was on a Sunday morning, and since forsaking the assembling of ourselves together for one race wasn't worth going to hell over, I took the virtual option and did it on my own at a time other than when God's people were assembling here for worship. But even with the virtual option, I downloaded a map of the course out at Lake Farm County Park, and I ran the assigned course.

In perhaps a similar way, God has also set a particular course before us. It may not be the track we choose, it may not be a course we design, it may not be the race we prefer, but our job is to run the race that God has "**set before us.**" And the race set before you may look a bit different from the race set before me. We might think of Peter at the end of the book of John. Jesus gives Peter some insight into how he would die, and Peter turns to John and basically says, "Well, what about him?" And Jesus responds by saying, "**If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!**" In other words, "Peter, you need to focus on running the race that is set before you, and don't be concerned about what other people might be doing." In the same way, our job is to be obedient to the course that is laid out before us. For Noah, living by faith meant building a giant boat. For Abraham, it meant leaving his home and sacrificing his son. For Sarah, it meant having a child at the age of 90. For Moses, it meant giving up his Egyptian privilege to identify with God's people who were living in slavery and to lead them to freedom. For the people of Israel, it meant crossing the Red Sea on dry land. For Rahab, it meant welcoming the spies. In all things, we must obey and follow the course that is set before us. For you, it might mean living with a difficult spouse. It might mean looking for help to overcome a sinful addiction of some kind. It might mean getting a cheaper place to avoid living in sin. It might mean carving out some time for prayer and personal study. It might mean taking on some service project. It might

mean taking on a leadership role that makes us uncomfortable. As James says, ***“Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin”*** (James 4:17).

And again, our job is to run this race with endurance. We think of Paul’s prayer for the Colossians in Colossians 1, where he prayed every day that they would be ***“strengthened with all power, according to [God’s] glorious might, for all ENDURANCE and patience with joy.”*** The Christian life is a life of ***“endurance”*** over many years as we run the race that has been ***“set before us.”*** And it may not always be exciting. I can tell you that running is not always exciting! For me, the hardest part of running would be the 50’ from my bed to the front porch, where I put on my shoes! So also spiritually, maybe we can’t read the entire Bible over the next day or two, but maybe we can work through a chapter a day when we get up in the morning. Maybe we won’t break some record of super duper spirituality, but that’s not our goal; our goal is ***“endurance.”*** Our goal is to stick with it over the long run.

So, how do we do this? I want us to spend the next few moments this morning exploring some practical suggestions, some strategies, according to the author of Hebrews. How do we run with endurance this race that is set before us?

I. **First of all, let’s notice from the very beginning of this passage, the author encourages us to THINK OF THOSE WHO’VE GONE BEFORE US.**

Even before he gets to the command, he starts with this word of encouragement, ***“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us....”*** So, he’s encouraging us to think about those great heroes of faith from Chapter 11, and I don’t want us to press the illustration any farther than it was originally intended, but he’s clearly using this picture of running a race, and in my mind he’s inviting us to envision the final lap of a marathon, and as the runners enter that stadium, those who have already finished the race turn to encourage those who are crossing the finish line. As some of you know from social media, this passage was on my mind two weeks ago when I set out to hike the Manitou Incline in Manitou Springs, Colorado, about an hour south of Denver. The Manitou Incline is a series of 2,768 steps over 9/10^{ths} of a mile with an elevation gain of 1,912 feet and a grade of up to 68%. As I understand it, it’s an old cog railway bed that was once used for getting mining supplies up into the mountains around Pike’s Peak. The picture here in the middle was taken near the bottom, looking straight up, and what you see at the very top is known as the “false summit,” as there is still more after that. And the picture on the left was taken somewhere around step 1,800. And I would just point out that I set my phone on a step, and I am reaching out and touching my phone here. That may give you an idea of how steep it is. This was taken maybe around step 600 or so, to give some perspective. I got nauseous and nearly passed out around step 1,200 and had to take a break for about 20 minutes. I had some Liquid IV and got back on the stairs. I was expecting leg trouble, but what I got was lung trouble. My legs were totally fine, but it was the lack of oxygen that got me. After step 1,800 I was basically taking ten steps at a time. I would count them out, and when I got to ten I was lightheaded and had to lean on my poles, do some gasping for air, for 20 seconds, and get back to it. People were turning back all along the way, people who appeared to be in nearly perfect physical shape were giving up. There were three bailout points along the way, and we might have lost about half of those who started. But this is what I wanted to share. These are my ***“cloud of witnesses.”*** Toward the end, those who have finished will turn around and encourage those who are making it the last bit of the way. I had never met these people, but they were cheering for me. When I got to the top, I encouraged the others. And before I took the 3-½ mile trail back down, I stood over to the side and took a few videos. I’ll see if I can share these. No guarantee on the sound, but I think you’ll get the point even if you can’t hear it.

But I think this is the point the writer of Hebrews is making. The *“cloud of witnesses”* would be a reference to those heroes of faith from Chapter 11, a reference to those who’ve gone on before, a reference to those who have finished the race successfully. These people, in a sense, are cheering us on. By the way, as I was preparing this morning’s lesson, someone noted that few (if any) world records have ever been set in practice. Why is that? There are no witnesses! There’s no one cheering the person on. Now, we need to be careful we don’t press the illustration too far. Some have asked, “Does this mean that our loved ones are looking down on us through ‘holes in the floor of heaven’?” I don’t think that’s the point here. Remember: They are not looking at us; we are pretty much encouraged to look to them. But this is a picture, an illustration, based on what we might find at the end of a race. And this is meant to encourage us. Think about those great heroes of faith, and do what they did. When facing a task of faith that seems beyond our ability to accomplish, remember Noah! When facing the challenge of moving away far away from home for the first time, remember Abraham! When facing temptation all alone and far away from home, remember Joseph! When facing trouble on the job, remember Moses! And so on. These great men and women of the faith have gone before us. They have already done what we are being called to do. And even in failure and sin, they endured. They might have stopped, they might have been sidetracked for a bit, but they got back to it. So, the second strategy to enduring here is to remember those great heroes of the faith who have gone before us. We study the word of God, not just to learn commands, but to be encouraged! When hiking in the wilderness, it is so encouraging to see a cairn (a pile of rocks) or a blaze on a rock or on a tree. Someone has been here before. This thing that I am doing is doable. So, look to God’s people from the past for encouragement.

II. As we continue noting these strategies for running the race with endurance, let’s also notice (from the middle of verse 1) that we are to LAY ASIDE EVERY ENCUMBRANCE AND THE SIN WHICH SO EASILY ENTANGLES US.

To *“lay aside”* is the idea of taking off an old or dirty piece of clothing. It’s the same word used in James 1:21 where James refers to *“putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness.”* It’s also used in 1 Peter 2:1, where Peter refers to *“putting aside all malice and deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.”* Only in this passage, the author refers to putting aside every *“encumbrance”* or *“weight.”* So, he certainly seems to be continuing this idea of running a race. Before running in a race, a runner will obviously take off any unnecessary weight. In fact, have you seen some of the old Grecian pottery depicting some of the ancient Olympics. They didn’t wear too much, did they? In fact, they often wore nothing at all! And certainly there may be a value to using weights of some kind during training, but when it’s time to race, those weights get left behind. I think of those weighted vests people sometimes wear, or maybe ankle weights, or maybe the heavy donut a baseball player may use on the bat. When the race or the game starts, those weights come off. In fact, it would be ridiculous for someone to run in the Olympics wearing a weighted vest. Some of you know that we toured the track at Daytona Beach last year, and this February we watched our very first NASCAR race together, the Daytona 500. And I noticed that not a single car was towing a trailer! Why is that? Weight is critical in a race. Or continuing our hiking analogy, you would not believe the emphasis on ultralight gear these days. When you go shopping for a pack, or a tent, or shoes, or even a jacket, they always list the weight of each item, because weight matters. By the way, I keep a checklist for what to bring on hiking and camping trips, and I reevaluate that list as I travel, and almost every time I will make a note to myself for next time, “Do not bring this.” Sometimes, what we do NOT bring may be almost as important as what we DO bring on a hike, because weight matters.

Well, weight also matters spiritually. And since weight and sin are listed separately here, I’m assuming there may be a difference. And to me, a *“weight”* in this context may be something that isn’t necessarily sinful in and of itself, but it’s something that slows us down. And what is weight for me may not be weight for you, and vice versa. In this context, weight might be a relationship, a hobby, a job, some kind of entertainment, social

media, Netflix, video games, anything that distracts us or weighs us down as we are running the Christian race. And sometimes we don't see it. In the hiking or backpacking community, people will sometimes ask for advice. They'll lay their pack out and ask for input, and the community will step in and say, "You don't really need this, this, and this," or, "I see you have this piece of equipment, but have you considered this other thing that's much lighter?" Sometimes we need others to keep an eye out for us. This is why it's so important to come together as a Christian family. We need the reminders to lay aside every encumbrance.

But the other part of this is that we must also lay aside *"the sin which so easily entangles us."* Sin *"entangles."* As the old saying goes, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay." Or, as we learned several months ago (from Hebrews 3:13), we are to *"...encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."* Sin is deceitful. Sin will entangle us. So we need to ask: What have we allowed into our lives, what have we tolerated, what have we protected, that God is now calling us to lay aside? If you're already a Christian, confess that sin to God and turn away from it. So, the second strategy is to lay aside every weight and every sin, anything that may weigh us down.

III. As we come to the end of this passage, let's notice a final strategy for running the race with endurance, as the author encourages us (in verse 2) to FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS.

In a race, as with driving, where we look is very important. I've driven nearly 7,000 miles over the past 2-½ weeks, and while driving at night in the mountains, I've often thought back to driver's ed, where the teacher gave some good advice about headlights coming at you in the dark. Don't stare at the headlights! Why? First of all, you'll be blind. But secondly, we tend to steer toward what we are looking at! And you don't want to be aiming for somebody's headlights! But here in Hebrews 12:2, we are encouraged to *"consider Jesus"* (as some translations put it), we are encouraged to *"fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith."* Look to Jesus! Don't get distracted by other runners, but look to Jesus! Because we tend to steer toward what we are looking at.

We fix our eyes on Jesus, *"the author and perfecter of faith who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* This race is not about our physical bodies, this race is about our motivation, our goal, and our goal, our focus, is Jesus. He leads the way, and he is now waiting for us at the end, seated at the right hand of the throne of God. This, by the way, is the only reference to the *"cross"* anywhere in the book of Hebrews. The cross remains one of the most painful and humiliating ways to die, and Jesus endured it for us. We look to him when we feel like quitting, because he endured.

Conclusion:

How's your race going this morning? If you haven't started the race yet, we would encourage you to get in it through faith, repentance, confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and baptism. If you're running and need some fellowship and encouragement, give me a call or reach out to your Christian family. Think of those who've gone before us, lay aside every weight and sin, and look to Jesus.

Before we get ready to partake of the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are God who encourages your people, and we are so thankful this morning for Jesus, who endured the cross for us. We are thankful for his perfect example, and we ask for your help as we live by faith in your Son who gave himself up for us. Help us to be more like him. Help us to encourage each other.

Thank you, Father, for Jesus. We come to you in his name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com