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**Running the Right Race**  
**Greg Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

*Hebrews 11:32-12:3*

It's been a privilege to intern here at Brewster Baptist this summer, and when you work at a church, you get to experience some things that most people don't. And I don't mean to be flippant or morbid, but in the past 11 weeks, I've been to 8 funerals, and I didn't even go to all of the services our church held. Some of the other staff and volunteers at BBC have been to 10 or more this summer. And when you go to a lot of funerals there are certain things you notice. And while I haven't done over 400 funerals like my dad, from the time I was in middle school, I was sitting back there in the booth where Charlie Kautz is now, working funerals in the booth every few weeks.

And hearing families and friends give eulogies and try to sum up people's lives, which is such a difficult task, one thing that stands out is how different all our lives are. Sometimes you hear all about a person's career, how they built a business and distinguished themselves. Sometimes you hear all about their family, how they were the perfect grandmother, a wonderful father. Sometimes it's about their welcoming home and the way they cooked. Some of the lives are incredibly blessed and some are not, some are marred by long illnesses, unexpected deaths, broken relationships. Some have lived long full lives and some have died before their time. Every life is different and different in a way that often seems deeply unfair. What's important to us and what happens to us varies hugely from person to person.

And yet at every funeral, whatever sort of life the person had, we speak about the good the person did. Whether as a businessman or a father or a friend, as a painter or a writer or a teacher, we speak about the good the person did. Because we all want to know that we've succeeded in life.

We all have a need to be validated, to feel that we've succeeded, that we've done the right thing, that we're loved and respected. And this is what we hear at funerals, that the person who we loved and who we lost, had a good life.

We all have that need for validation, and while we're living, often we compare ourselves to the people around us. We compare our lives to our neighbors, to our friends, to what we see on social media. We are surrounded by images and examples of how other people live, and that's who we measure ourselves against, because we want to know that we're doing well, that we're succeeding, we're winning. Yet when we do that, when we compare ourselves to others, it can be discouraging, it can make us feel inadequate or jealous. Because with the wide variety of lives people live, there's always going to be someone else who seems to have it better, who seems to have a better home, better friends, a better family, a better life.

Our passage today responds to these same things, to the wide variety of lives we can live and to our need for validation. And to understand why, we need to understand the context of this epistle:

The book of *Hebrews* was written to Jewish Christians, hence the name Hebrews. We can't be certain who wrote it because this letter doesn't include a greeting like so many of the other epistles stating clearly something like "I Paul greet and will see you soon."

But we do know from the contents of the letter, a little about why it was written. As we heard in the scripture read earlier, the audience of the letter were Christians who because of persecution were beginning to backslide to Judaism.

Christianity was facing more and more opposition from the Roman Empire and from society at large, while Judaism remained tolerated. And so for Christians with a Jewish background, there was a natural temptation to slip back into their old ways.

And so the author encourages the Hebrews to hold on to their faith, to be courageous in the face of opposition, social pressure, and even persecution. For most of the letter he does this by carefully explaining how the new covenant in Jesus Christ is superior to the old covenant and the law. He shows how Jesus is a better messenger than the angels, a better law-giver than Moses, a better altar than the old temple, a better priest than the Levites, and so on.

But now, as he reaches the climax of the letter, the argument takes a turn and he launches into a famous passage, sometimes called the Hall of Faith, where he lists all these characters from the Old Testament who faithfully followed God. And our passage from *Hebrews* this morning comes as the author realizes he's running out of time to list all the people who followed God. So he summarizes his message and highlights that same thing that you'll notice if you go to a lot of funerals: The huge differences between different people's lives. He gives us the huge range of lives found among the people who followed God and then tells us what that means for us following God today. Listen to *Hebrews chapter 11 verse 32, through chapter 12 verse 3*.

"And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again:

and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set

before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

As we listen to this passage, to this list of all the different things people have done as they followed God, to this hall of faith. We notice a clear division. There seem to be winners and losers. Some subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped lions, quenched fires, escaped the sword, became strong, fought valiantly, defeated armies, they were raised from the dead.

And others had trials, mocked, scourged, chained, jailed, stoned, sawn in half, killed, exiled, impoverished, afflicted, tormented, homeless they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Some were blessed in this life and some suffered. Some seem to have good lives and some seem to have bad lives, and there is a huge difference between them.

The author of *Hebrews* knows his Bible well and if we read our Old Testaments closely, we'll find the same thing he did. Some people in the Bible are blessed and empowered by God in incredible ways, but others, others suffer.

But how do we make sense of this? How do we understand the huge differences between the lives of all these people who followed God in the Old Testament? How do we make sense of those same differences in the lives of people around us today?

The author points out two things. In *verse 39* he says, “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise. All had faith, but none received the promise. For however different all their lives appeared, all had faith, but none received the promise.”

You might think that people who were mocked or jailed or exiled or killed, were being punished by God for not following him, but no, all had faith. All had a good report. All of them were truly following God, even if it led somewhere no one would want to go.

And you might think that those who had been made strong or achieved victory or conquered kingdoms, had received the good things God had promised to the faithful, but no, none received the promise.

However different the lives of the faithful may appear, the author reminds the Hebrews of two truths, that faith doesn't always lead to prosperity now and that no one has yet received the good things that God has promised. No matter how bad our lives may seem, this does not mean we aren't following God. And no matter how good our lives may seem, we have not received all that God has promised us.

The Hebrews receiving this letter had made that same mistake that so many of us make, of thinking that when things go well, God approves of us, and that when things go badly, God disapproves of us or that God isn't really faithful. The Hebrews were beginning to suffer persecution, they were beginning to be destitute, tormented, afflicted. And so they were ready to turn back on God.

But faith in God doesn't always lead to prosperity now; sure faith can stop the mouths of lions and defeat armies and raise the dead to life, but it can also lead us to imprisonment and sickness and weakness. And when God does bless us here and now, we need to remember that we are still waiting for something greater. Because what God has promised us is much greater than worldly prosperity and deliverance from our current troubles, God has promised us eternal prosperity and an end to all trouble. Following Jesus doesn't mean our life now becomes easier, following Jesus means our life becomes more like Jesus' life.

But this alone, these truths by themselves, are not very reassuring, not very encouraging. The Hebrews are falling away from Jesus, they're saying why even bother being a Christian, is this faith really worth it? And the author of the letter says, well faith may not help you now, in fact it might get you killed, but later you might get something good out of it, it's coming later. But has anyone else received that good thing that God has promised for us later? Well, no, no one has received the promise, not even the most faithful followers of God in the Old Testament, none of them has received what God has promised. If that's all that faith in God can get us, why have faith?

But the author isn't done yet, not only will faith not get you prosperity now, not only have the most faithful people still not received what they were promised, but this faith means you have to get to work. He says, lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and run with patience the race that is set before us. He says we have to keep going, he compares life to a race that we need to keep running, even though we are weighed down with burdens and troubles, even though sin is entangling and ensnaring us, even though it's going to take endurance and patience and perseverance.

Why would we want to run this race? Why would we want to have this faith? Listen to *verse 2*: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

In Jesus, we know why we have faith. He is the author and the finisher of our faith; it begins and ends in Jesus. While no one in the Old Testament received all that God has promised, none of them has experienced eternal life and blessing and glory, but Jesus has. And just as there is a race set before us, a race that requires patience and endurance and suffering, there was a cross set before Jesus, but Jesus patiently endured that cross, Jesus despised its shame, he had faith even though that faith led him not to prosperity but to suffering, betrayal, and shame in this world. And because he had faith, because he was the Son of God who lived a sinless life, taking the punishment for our sins on the cross; he received what God has promised, eternal life. Jesus was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right of the throne of God.

When we look to Jesus, we see the pattern for our own lives, we see the race that we have to run. Here is the example, the proof, that even though Jesus was perfectly faithful, that faith did not bring prosperity, that faith brought a cross, but having endured the cross, having patiently waited through suffering and despair, he received God's promise.

And that is our faith, the thing that we believe that drives our life. That Jesus, a man two thousand years ago, was also God, that he lived a perfect life, that he died for our sins on the cross, and that God raised him from the dead, and we have faith that these things are true, and that God will also raise us from the dead. The whole argument hinges on the truth of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know the race is worth running, because Jesus ran it, and he received the promise. Jesus is the proof that whatever suffering we have now, our faith in him will be rewarded.

And Jesus shows us that receiving God's promise takes patience. It takes putting up with suffering and shame and even opposition from people around us. But how do we live that out, what does that look like practically today? Although we're following Jesus, our faith in him is almost certainly not going to turn out exactly the way his did. We're not going to be condemned by the government and religious leaders and sentenced to death only to miraculously rise from the dead on the third day. Most of us are going to lead small lives dealing with the everyday problems of health and money and other people, most of us, are going to die in a way that's not recorded in the history books, and we are going to be raised again to life not as a miraculous sign after three days, but in the great, final resurrection at the end of history.

And this is where we need to look back to the verses at the end of *chapter 11*, which listed all those strange and exceptional things in the lives of people following God. All those lives don't look like each other, but they also don't look like ordinary lives. As Christians, our lives are supposed to be different from the world's. We aren't running the same race as the world, we are running the race that is set before us, the letter says. Which is a strange phrase, the race set before us, because normally you don't have to tell a runner which race to run. At a track meet, nobody has to tell the runners to stay inside the track or which way to go. It's not hard to find the finish line.

Yet we're told to run the race set before us, implying there are other races out there, implying this race is not the race that everyone else is running. Let me make an analogy. The 43rd annual Brewster Brew Run was yesterday, starting just down the street on 6A at the Woodshed, looping around for 5.2 miles and then ending near the start at the north end of 124 and the Brewster General Store. It's a classic, small town road race. It's clearly marked, it's painful exercise but it's also fun, there's competition but there's also encouragement, there's the thrill of running with the crowd. That's what the race of life is like for most people. It has its ups and downs, some do better than others, but for everyone it ends in the same place, right back where you started. You come from nothing and you return to nothing. It's pointless. To the world, the race of life is hard and fun but pointless.

But imagine if while the Brew Run was going on, you tried to come here to Brewster Baptist Church. If from wherever you lived, you started running to the church. Some of us would be running with the

stream of all the people, but some of us would be running upstream in the opposite direction of all the people and some of us would be on a road with no one else there. For us Christians, that's what the race of life is like. We're running a completely different race than everyone else around us.

Sometimes to the world it looks like we're winning, sometimes by faith we're made strong, we're healed, we become wise, but sometimes by faith we're made weak because God's strength is perfect in weakness, sometimes our bodies or our minds fail, we suffer, to the world it looks like we're losing. But in reality, it's not that we're winning or losing, we're running a different race entirely. We're not trying to have a good time running the little loop from the Woodshed to the General Store. We're running to Jesus; we're trying to become more like Jesus in everything we do.

And that's why we need that great cloud of witnesses. Because we're not running the race the world is, we can't look to the world around us to support us, validate us, or show us which direction to go. Although sometimes following Jesus means doing the same thing as the rest of the world, it means loving our friends and our families, sometimes following Jesus means going against the world, it means loving our enemies and humbling ourselves. And so when we look for examples of how to live our life, for proof that we have a good life, we don't compare ourselves to the people around us now, but to the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before for us, living by faith. And that cloud of witnesses has huge variety and yet is united in its belief in Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection.

As a church and as individuals, we have to run the right race; we have to remember that we are not running the same race as the world around us. And we need to keep running to God no matter what happens, because receiving God's promises takes patience.

As a church, this means not getting caught up in the trends and fads and vices of our own particular place and time. We don't judge ourselves by what society thinks of us, but by that great cloud of witnesses, by all the other people around the world and throughout history who have followed Jesus.

It's not about whether our church aligns with what we read in the news or see on tv, but whether our church aligns with other churches in Alaska and Bulgaria and Uganda and Northeast India. Whether our church still aligns with the people who founded this church almost two hundred years ago and with the first Christians who came to New England four hundred years ago and with the first Christians period, two thousand years ago. This is the great cloud of witnesses our church has to be measured against and so long as we center our church on Jesus, we can be united with the church around the world and through the ages.

And when we all individually center our lives on Jesus, on his life, on his work, on his spirit, our church will be centered on him too. How do we do that? Listen to *verse 3*: "Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds." Consider Jesus. The way we endure in the race of life, the way we keep from being weary and faint, is we constantly consider Jesus. We have Jesus on our mind all the time.

Practically this means worshiping him like we're doing now, it means spending time in our Bibles learning about him, spending time in prayer talking to Jesus, spending time in fellowship with other people following him. If we want to live like Jesus so that we'll be rewarded like Jesus, so that we'll receive what God has promised, then we have to have Jesus on our mind and in our heart every day. Only when we look to Jesus can we run the right race without being weary.

And while we look to Jesus in the race set before us, notice what Jesus looks to as he endures the cross: Jesus for the joy that was set before him endured the cross. What was that joy? What was that thing that Jesus, the almighty son of God, the creator of the universe, the king of kings and lord of lords, was lacking, what new joy drove him to endure the cross? Us. We are that joy. We were lost in sin and far from God, but for the joy of being near to us, for the joy of loving us, for the joy of us, Jesus came down and endured death on the cross and has been seated at the right hand of the father where he waits for us to receive the joy that God has promised us, if we believe in him. Let's pray.

Benediction from *Hebrews 13:20-21*: "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."