

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three or four weeks, we have been populating a room without ever naming it. Beverly, faithful for a hundred years without needing to see how her story fit the whole. The eighteen women of the 1915 Women's Guild, keeping a ledger through a world war they had no guarantee of surviving. The Ephesian elders, weeping on a shore, commended to God rather than a plan. My own mother, promising me she'd get her wings while I went to get mine. The deacon at Gateway of Hope who had the courage to ask me the one question I was trying so hard to avoid — "It sounds like you're trying to let go while still holding on" — and who, in doing so, helped set an entire congregation free to follow God into a future none of us could have written. Every one of them, named or unnamed, was someone who died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it only from a distance.

This morning, the writer of Hebrews finally gives that room its name. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." There it is. All of Hebrews 11 — Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and the rest — was never simply a history lesson. It was the writer filling a stadium. And now, in chapter 12, we finally look up and realize the stands are full.

I want you to notice something important about who is actually in that cloud. These are not people watching from a distance, grading our performance, disappointed if we stumble. Every single person in that cloud already ran their own leg of this exact race. They know exactly what it costs to keep believing without seeing the finish line, because they lived it themselves. This is not a crowd of judges. It's a crowd of finishers, cheering on whoever is running next.

But if we go back further still, all the way to the beginning of this series, that room turns out to be even more crowded than I've let on. The Philippian jailer is standing in those stands — a man who drew his sword to end his own life one moment, and by morning was washing the wounds of the very prisoners he had guarded, newly baptized, newly a brother in Christ. He's cheering us on now. So is the Ethiopian official, baptized on a desert road by a man he'd met only an hour before, going on his way rejoicing toward a country that had never once been mentioned as a place the gospel was headed. So is Cornelius, and his whole household, once considered too Gentile, too unclean, too far outside the boundary lines the church itself had drawn — now fully inside them, cheering as loudly as anyone.

And so, remarkably, is Saul of Tarsus. Once the church's most feared enemy, a man who breathed threats and dragged believers to prison, now standing in that same cloud as Paul — Christ's chosen instrument, the very man whose journey we have followed for most of this series, from Corinth to Athens to a storm at sea to a chained but unhindered witness in Rome. If Saul of Tarsus can end up in that crowd, cheering for whoever runs next, I don't think there is a single person in this room today who is too far gone, too far behind, or too uncertain about their own next step to belong there themselves one day.

That is the crowd Hebrews finally names for us this morning. Not distant strangers. Not spectators grading our performance from a safe distance. Former enemies turned brothers. Outsiders turned family. Ordinary, faithful people who ran their own leg of this exact race without ever seeing the finish line — and who are now, in some sense none of us can fully explain, cheering for us to keep going.

And that changes everything about how we hear what comes next. Because whatever St. John's is about to walk into — whatever this season of discernment asks of us — we are not the first congregation, and we will not be the last, to run a leg of this race without yet knowing exactly where it leads. We are simply the ones running it now.

I. EMPOWERED TO STRIP OFF THE WEIGHT (v. 1)

The writer's first instruction is not "run faster" or "run harder." It's "let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely." Notice that this verse actually names two different things, not one. There is sin — the entangling kind, the kind that trips a runner up on purpose. But there is also simply weight — things that are not necessarily wrong in themselves, but that slow a runner down anyway. A serious long-distance runner doesn't just avoid what's illegal. They strip away anything unnecessary, even good things, if those things add weight without adding speed.

That distinction matters enormously for a congregation like ours. Not everything that needs to be set aside in a season like this is sin. Some of it is simply weight — good things from a different season that were never meant to be carried into this one. Habits that made sense once but no longer serve where we're headed. Comfortable assumptions that used to be true and may not be anymore. Even legitimate fear about what's ahead, or an understandable longing for certainty before we take a single step, can become weight if we let it slow the race before it's even begun.

I lived this distinction myself, more literally than I expected to, when I finally had to set aside the pastorate at Gateway of Hope. It was not wrong. It was not sin. Thirteen years of ministry there had been real, fruitful, and good. But it had become weight — not because anything about it was bad, but because I could not run two legs of a race at the same time. I could not stay fully present to Gateway of Hope and fully present to whatever God was calling me toward next. Holding onto both, the way I initially tried to when I offered to stay on as a once-a-month presence, wasn't actually running either race well. It was just carrying extra weight down the track and calling it faithfulness.

That is exactly what my deacon saw before I did, and exactly why his question landed the way it did — "It sounds like you're trying to let go while still holding on." A good thing, a genuinely God-given thing, had simply become weight for the leg of the race I was actually being asked to run. Letting it go fully, rather than partially, wasn't a betrayal of everything God had built through Gateway of Hope. It was what finally let me run unencumbered into St. John's.

I don't say any of this to suggest we already know exactly what needs to be set aside for St. John's next season. That is precisely the work of discernment still in front of us. But Hebrews is honest with us here in a way I want to be honest with you: laying aside weight is part of running well. It was never meant to be comfortable. It is, however, meant to be freeing.

II. EMPOWERED TO RUN OUR OWN LEG WITH ENDURANCE (v. 1)

The verse continues: "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." I want you to notice two things about that phrase. First, it is endurance, not speed, that the writer calls for. Endurance implies distance. It implies time. It implies a race that is not going to be won in a single dramatic sprint, but through sustained, faithful effort over the long haul.

Second, and just as important — it is the race set before us. Not someone else's race. Not the race the Ephesian church ran, or the race the Corinthian church ran, or even the race Gateway of Hope ran. Our own race, set specifically before us, in this specific season, with all its particular questions and particular unknowns.

I think that word "endurance" is exactly the word St. John's needs to hear as we step into a season of genuine discernment about our future. I do not believe this will be resolved quickly, and I don't think it's meant to be. This is not a sprint toward a fast answer. It is a race that will require us to keep showing up, keep praying, keep listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, over however much time this actually takes — trusting that endurance, not urgency, is the posture God is actually asking of us.

I think of my own middle miles now as one long, continuous stretch, even though at the time they felt like two completely separate ordeals. Thirteen years of endurance at Gateway of Hope — nine people, two hundred and fifty dollars, a lease we had no business signing, rent that kept climbing, a season of COVID where we fell twelve thousand dollars behind with no idea how it would be resolved. And then, almost the moment I finally set that endurance down, eighteen more months of an entirely different kind of endurance — job loss, Uber driving, a near foreclosure, a repossession, and finally my mother's death in the middle of flight training I couldn't leave.

At the time, those two seasons felt like separate races entirely — one ending in surrender, the other beginning in fresh disaster, with no visible connection between them at all. I could not see, in the middle of either one, that I was actually still running the very same race. It is only from here, standing in this pulpit, that I can finally see it as one unbroken stretch of endurance — thirteen years teaching me to trust God's provision when nothing about the math made sense, followed immediately by eighteen months teaching me to trust God's presence when nothing about the pain made sense — and both of them, together, were simply the long middle miles that carried me to St. John's. I did not endure two races. I endured one very long one, and I am only now able to see where all of it was actually leading.

Every runner who has ever competed in a genuine long-distance race will tell you the same thing: the middle miles are the hardest, not because they're the most dangerous, but because they're the least dramatic. There's no starting gun anymore, and the finish line still isn't in sight. That is exactly where a discernment season tends to live — not at the exciting beginning, and not yet at the resolution, but in the long, ordinary middle, where endurance is the only thing that actually gets you through.

III. EMPOWERED BY FIXED EYES, NOT FIXED OUTCOMES (vv. 2–3)

So how does anyone actually run that kind of race well? The writer tells us exactly where to look: "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Notice what we are told to fix our eyes on. Not the cloud of witnesses behind us, as important and encouraging as they are. Not the track itself, with all its uncertainty. Not even the finish line, which none of us can actually see yet. We are told to fix our eyes on Jesus — the One who authored this very kind of faith and who will bring it to completion in us, the same way He brought it to completion in every name in that cloud before us.

And look at how Jesus Himself ran His race. He endured the cross "for the joy that was set before him." He didn't endure because suffering was good in itself. He endured because He kept His eyes fixed on what suffering was leading toward — resurrection, and a seat at the right hand of God. Verse 3 makes the application explicit: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." The whole purpose of fixing our eyes on Jesus is to keep us from growing weary in a race that asks for real endurance.

I think that is such an important safeguard for us to hear as we begin this season together. Endurance was never meant to mean gritted teeth and white knuckles, simply willing ourselves through by sheer determination. Biblical endurance means sustained attention on the right thing — on Jesus Himself — rather than on the outcome we cannot yet see. We do not need to know exactly where this race leads St. John's in order to run it well. We simply need to keep our eyes fixed on the One who is already both the author and the finisher of it.

I want to be honest with you about something before we go any further this morning, because I think it matters, especially as we prepare to close this series and open a new season together. I have shared a great deal of my own story with you these last several months — Gateway of Hope, the eighteen months of unemployment, my mother's death, the door that opened to bring me here. I did not share those things so that you would remember me. Romans tells us we overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony — and that word only has power because of what it points to, not because of who is speaking it. My story is not the point of this series. It was never meant to be. It is simply one more witness in that same cloud, no different in kind from Abraham, or the Ephesian elders, or the Women's Guild, or the deacon who asked me the hard question — an ordinary person testifying to an extraordinary God who makes no distinction between persons. Acts 10 already taught us that. God shows no favoritism. My story carries no more weight in that cloud than yours does, or the story God is still writing in whoever sits next to you this morning. Every one of those witnesses, mine included, exists for exactly one purpose: to point your eyes away from the witnesses themselves and toward Jesus — the only name in this whole race that actually matters, the only One who is truly the author and the finisher of the faith we are all being asked to run with.

CONCLUSION

We are not the first runners, and we will not be the last. Every name in that cloud of witnesses ran a leg of this same race before us, without seeing the finish line any more clearly than we can see it now. Beverly ran her leg. The Women's Guild ran theirs. The Ephesian elders ran theirs, weeping on a shore, trusting a promise more than a plan. My own mother ran hers, all the way to the very end, promising me she'd get her wings while sending me to get mine.

And now, this season, it is our turn to run the leg set before us — stripping off whatever weight no longer serves the race ahead, settling in for the long, ordinary endurance the middle miles require, and keeping our eyes fixed not on the outcome, but on the One who has never once failed to finish what He begins.

INVITATION

So let me leave you with this question as we prepare to begin the next chapter of our own story together. What weight might God be asking you to lay aside, so that you can run more freely into whatever season is ahead? And where have your eyes drifted — toward the uncertainty of the track, or the distance to the finish

line — instead of staying fixed on Jesus, who is already both the author and the perfecter of the faith we're being asked to run this race with?

We do not run alone. We never have. And the One who calls us to run has already gone before us, cross and all, straight through to joy on the other side.

Let us pray...