



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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March 10, 2010
Midweek Lenten Worship
Hebrews 12:1-3
Pastor Randy Ott

The Reason to Endure

We don't know who the Holy Spirit used to write the letter to the Hebrews. That's been lost to us. But we can be pretty certain, from what I just read to you, that he was really familiar with the Olympics of his day, the Isthmian games that took place in Greece. When he talks about this here throughout the things that entangle and trip us up and run with perseverance the race marked out for us, that's the imagery he is going to. He is using that to paint a picture in the mind of the people that would have heard this letter so that they would know exactly what he was talking about.

It's kind of interesting when you look at some of the things he describes. He talks about running with perseverance the race marked out for us. That's pretty similar to the Christian life, the Christian race. But for the person training for the Isthmian games, they all recognize that it took hard work and it took training. If you were going to compete in the Isthmian games, you had to take a vow that you would spend at least 10 months training before you ran this race. So this just wasn't showing up and let's all just do whatever. This was a serious event that they prepared for at length. That's kind of the picture of the life in Christ. It's something that takes complete and ongoing training. It's just not a matter of being equipped to do it just by showing up. There are a lot of things that are going to seek to entangle us and cause us to fall as you run.

I don't know what they wore back then when they ran, but I'm guessing it's nothing at all like what I'm wearing. I have a hard enough time getting back up the steps after I commune people in the back let alone trying to imagine running 26 miles with something to trip over or hitting your legs all the time.

If you picture that thought, there are a lot of things that trip us up. There are a lot of things that cause us problems. We'll think about some of them as we go through looking at this text this evening. But the Christian race is full of things that will entangle us and trip us up. The Christian race is that constantly, as Luther put it, drowning daily, drowning the Old Adam and rising to live a new life, the daily struggle to live for the One who loved us first.

The other thing I think you kind of see in these three short verses I read to you, is how the writer to the Hebrews reminds the people that the Christian race, just like a race, is a battle of wills. A track coach once was telling his team about a distance race that he was running in college. He was running side by side in the lead with some guy and he felt like he was sprinting just to keep up with this guy. His lungs were burning. His

heart was pounding. He was starting to wonder if he could keep up, but he was trying to stay as calm as he could on the outside and not show the other guy this. Finally, as he was thinking about all this he said to the other guy in as cheery a voice as he could, "Doesn't this feel great?" He didn't believe a word of what he was saying, but he said it to the other guy. He said eventually the other guy just started slowing down and backing off, and he thought he won the race because he won that battle of wills.

Think about it, the battle of will that goes on inside each one of us; our sinful nature has all kinds of reasons and excuses why we shouldn't spend time with God, why we shouldn't train and struggle to train ourselves through daily use of the Word. Our sinful nature has more excuses than our skin has atoms. That's just the way it is. That's how we are.

We are constantly struggling against ourselves. Not only that, sometimes, just like the people that he was writing to here, we struggle against those who are outside of us, who are encouraging us to give in to what our sinful nature wants. When the guy was writing to the Hebrews, these Jewish Christians were facing persecution. Their feet were being held to the fire. They were now in a not officially recognized religion. They didn't have the pomp and circumstance that temple worship had. They didn't have the rites and the rituals and the cool looking gowns that the high priest had. In fact, all they did is get together in their homes with one another and they had little pieces of bread and a cup of wine that they passed around. It didn't look like much. Then, on top of that, they had to try to explain to someone that the God they worshiped is so great because he died. The idea of a God dying just didn't seem to fit with many people. Sacrificing himself, dying as a common criminal, being crucified, Christ crucified, that was just foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block for the Jews. It just didn't fit.

So there were many, many of their countrymen, their relatives no doubt, saying "Come on back. Come home. Come back to what is comfortable. Come join us in worshiping in the temple. Put away that foolish Christianity stuff. He's not the Messiah. The Messiah is still coming. Come back to what you know and what you are comfortable with." That temptation had to be strong for them. They were really, really pressured not to endure, not to continue on. They were being pressured in a battle of wills with their neighbor and with their own sinful nature to say, "That's it. I've had enough. This Jesus stuff just isn't doing it for me anymore."

You know what is really sad? That's really the plight of many people yet today. "That Jesus stuff just isn't doing it for me anymore." I can understand completely why people would say that. If they've grown up with nothing more than the example of parroting a few words for an hour on a Sunday morning, standing up at the right time, sitting down at the right time and not fussing with your brother or sister, and they've never seen their parents dig into the Word at home, I can see where they would say, "This just doesn't do it for me." They haven't gotten to the substance. They haven't gotten to the meat. They haven't gotten to where the strength is found in the Word. They might know the mechanics of it, but the meat, that's missing.

This whole idea of enduring; I think a lot of times people think they've got time to endure. Right now they are just too busy to put the time and energy into digging into God's Word and growing in faith and applying it. And it's just too doggone easy to get into the sinful nature and the people around you that are encouraging you to do things that you know quite clearly God has said is wrong. It's just too easy, so you say to yourself, "I'll get more serious about this God stuff later when I have kids and they start going to school or Sunday school. Then I'll get serious about the God stuff."

Things never slow down though, do they? By the time the kids are there, we have other excuses. We are tired. "I've worked hard all week, so I don't have time for that stuff. When I get home at night, I don't have time to talk to my family about God. That's why I send them to Sunday school for Pete's sake. That's their job, not mine." Then we think we deserve a break and have the same outlook on what we deserve, like Tiger Woods. Instead of chasing women, maybe we are chasing our own pleasure in some other way, shape or form, so we don't find time for God.

We say when the kids are gone and they've moved out, then we'll have more time. Then we are busy with other things. When we're retired, we say we'll have more time. Then we think we need that break. Then we say, "When I get sick, then I'll start relying on God and I'll run to him." This whole idea that "when it gets closer to the starting gun, then I'll be ready to run the race," it isn't going to work for me. If I have to go run 26 miles tomorrow and I haven't trained, it isn't happening. And if we think we can wait until we hear a starting gun and then we'll be able to snap up and get close to God, we are kind of silly. Then again, no one has ever taught you that sin necessarily makes you smart. It makes silly ideas like, "I'll know when I have time to get close to God and I'll find time for him later" sound like a good idea.

Endurance is produced through constant training. Not only does it produce blessings for us, it produces blessings for those that we come into contact with. So if I haven't trained as faithfully as I should, I'm hurting you. I'm not just hurting me, I'm hurting you. If you haven't trained as faithfully as you should, it isn't just hurting you. It's hurting all the other body of Christ that God has given you gifts to use.

A race is a personal thing, but the Christian race isn't. God wants us to train and endure so that we can be his hands and his voice and his blessings to others. In fact, that's what the writer to the Hebrews is really talking about. He said, "*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses*" (Hebrews 12:1). Therefore, it points back to what he had just talked about in Chapter 11. In Chapter 11 he talked about the heroes of faith, the Hall of Fame of faith. By faith Abraham did this. By faith Moses did this. By faith Noah built that Ark when his eyes couldn't see anything. By faith, by faith, by faith, they operated on what they believed, not what they could see.

You and I are called by God to grow in our faith so that we can be that example also to someone else. We are to be that great cloud of witnesses. Just like this other great cloud of witnesses, we are not to point to ourselves and say, "Be more like me." That's

not what the great cloud of witnesses pointed to. They pointed to faith, the object of their faith. That's why the writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us fix our eyes not on the great cloud of witnesses, but let us fix our eyes on Jesus."

As we run the Christian race on the side, there's a whole bunch of people who are now in heaven, I suppose, and they are encouraging us because they know how blessed are those who are called to the marriage feast of the lamb. They are experiencing it, and they, just like our Lord, want us to experience it desperately. They know the only way that we find the endurance is in Christ crucified.

Look at what it says, "*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame*" (Hebrews 12:2). The joy set before him? This is the guy who the night before he was going to go to that cross said, "Father, if you can find any other way of doing this, do it. I don't want to have to go through the agony of hell. Not my will, but your will be done." That doesn't sound like joy.

But that wasn't the joy. The agony of hell wasn't the joy. He wasn't someone who just enjoyed pain and suffering. He didn't want to have to endure the pain and suffering. The joy that led him to endure it would be you and me and taking away our sins, having been perfect for our lives and taking the guilt of all of our sins with him on the cross. The joy that he found on that cross was knowing that when he cried out "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" he was doing it so that you and I would not have to spend an eternity crying out, "Why am I forsaken?" Instead, we would be in that marriage feast of the lamb. We would be enjoying the One who sat down at the right hand of the throne. He himself would be the light at the center of the throne.

This is what leads us to endure. Not our willpower, not our will, but the will of our God who loved us enough to endure the cross so that we can endure. Not only is the cross the reason to endure, it's the only thing that enables us to endure. So don't take your eyes off it until you are called to that marriage feast of the lamb.