

Finishing Faith
Heb. 12:1-3
SERIES “More”
Jarrett Stephens

Illus. Trouble Focusing – Since I was a child, I have always had a hard time focusing on a task that is before me. We didn’t have the diagnosis of ADD or ADHD and medication that we give to children and students today that may be a little too hyper or that have a little bit extra energy to expend, but my mom assures me and my wife certainly agrees that I probably had it and if the proper meds would have been available when I was a child, I would have certainly qualified to have been on it.

I’m telling you; you have no idea how hard it is for me to sit down and write a sermon like this each week. I usually write my messages on Thursday mornings OFF campus because if I am here at the church office and I hear any amount of talking going on outside my door, there is something in me that **MUST** get up and see what’s going on.

If something “dings”, I’m looking at it, so I have to silence and put away everything! For as long as I have been alive, I have always had a tough time, no matter what I am doing to **FOCUS** (squirrel).

And yet to finish strong in this race called the Christian life...and this is what our text is about today - it’s about running our race in life and being able to finish strong all the way to the end. If we are to do this, what we need perhaps more than anything is what I struggle with...the ability to focus!

I’m calling this final message in our *MORE* series: **Finishing Faith**

And if I was to put the sermon in a sentence, I would simply say it like this: **Our focus determines our finish**

All of us want to finish strong. All of us desire to finish well. I’ve not met one person that has ever said, “You know what, I want to live for Jesus all my life and then at the end just blow it completely.”

No one says that...no one wants that...and yet we have all seen people in different stages of life get off course...lose sight of what is most important and **NOT** continue in what they started so strongly in.

We all know people that at one time sat on the row besides us or was in Life Group with us...they were active...engaged...but now, nowhere to be found!

Today’s message is going to address how we can finish strong...this is what the writer of Hebrews wanted for his audience:

- He didn’t want them backing down...
- He didn’t want them throwing in the towel...
- He didn’t want them quitting on them on faith or Jesus...

He wanted them to finish strong and what he communicates to them here in Heb. 12 is that their finish will be determined by the strength of their focus.

Again: **Our focus determines our finish.**

This is a finishing faith.

Heb. 12:1-3 – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (After showing us 40+ examples of faith in chapter 11, the author now says “THEREFORE...BECAUSE of their life and the example they have set, here’s how YOU run and motivation for continuing to run!), let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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.”

The writer of Hebrews paints a beautiful picture here of the Christian life being like a race. Now, this “race” imagery is not new...we see it throughout the New Testament.

Acts 20:24 – “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

1 Cor. 9:24-27 – “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

2 Tim. 4:7 – “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

This life that we are living is like a race. And it’s NOT a sprint...it’s more like a marathon...a marathon with an obstacle course that never seems to end, right? Almost feels like it’s one of those Spartan/Gladiator races!

In fact, the word “race” in the original language comes from a word that we get our English word “agony” from! The race of life is one of agony and pain...ups and downs...twists and turns.

And it feels like this doesn’t it? As we run this race called life, we get tired. Sometimes we want to quit. Sometimes we want to throw in the towel. Sometimes we just need to take a break and catch our breath at times. The race of life is no joke!

The question is, “How can we keep our focus in a race like this in order that we not just finish, but finish strong?”

I want to suggest four ways:

- 1. Look around**

Heb. 12:1a – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

The writer has just spent an entire chapter (Heb 11) writing of men and women throughout the Old Testament that had lived by faith...made decisions that were based on faith, and he states here that

these men and women are “witnesses” that are surrounding these Hebrew believers as they attempt to run their race.

Now, just a couple of thoughts. First, each person named and unnamed in Hebrews 11, has finished their race. They are surrounding them because they have already crossed the finish line! That’s important - they know what it is to complete the marathon.

As we’ve studied their life, we’ve discussed that they were just like us: mere humans...NOT super saints...and each of them were frail...weak...imperfect...not a one of them had it all together!

And yet, these people are listed in the Hall of Faith, and they are given to us as examples to look to and follow as people who completed their race. This means: If they can finish their race, then we too can finish ours!

Illus. College & seminary – There’s power in an example! “if they can finish I can”

Not only is it clear they have finished their race, but the insinuation from how this is written is that just as these witnesses surrounded the Hebrew believers of their day, they are surrounding us as well.

Now, scholars’ debate whether these witnesses and others are in fact literally, physically watching us. And there is no way of really knowing that – we’ll find out one day!

However, the language here...the wording here, I believe is purposeful.

The text states we are “surrounded by” ...we are encompassed by these witnesses AND listen to this: Whether they see us or not doesn’t ultimately matter. What’s really important and what really matters is that because they’ve gone before us, and we have their testimony recorded, we can see them (so to speak)!

The point of the surrounding is NOT so much them looking at us as us looking at them! And they have finished their race and because of their finish...and finished in faith, we can gather strength from looking to them!

Illus. Whataburger 10k – Now, my real motivation was the free Whataburger after! But you know what helped me...pushed me on...encouraged me as I got to mile 4 or so? There were people all up and down the race cheering the runners on...they had signs...they were ringing bells...this is the picture being painted here!

Now, I just want you to think about that...people have gone before us...have run this marathon...and finished it...they are looking on! This should give you great encouragement.

- If you’re feeling a bit overwhelmed with what you sense the Lord is asking you...if you look around, you can see Abraham saying, “You can do this...I know what it’s like to be stretched...to be called to do something that you may not understand...”
- If you’re being ridiculed for a stance that you’ve taken that honors the Lord, if you look around, you can see Noah holding a sign that says, “I built an ark and it had never rained.” And you can be encouraged to keep going...

- If you're insecure or fearful of what may happen to you should you follow the Lord in this way, you can look around and see Moses, who left the security of Egypt and he's just smiling at you, knowing that if God could give him strength and be with him then he could give me strength and be with me...
- If you're in the fire of a trial of a trouble, if you will just look around you'll see Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego ringing a bell saying, "Don't sweat it, we were there too and a 4th man showed up in the fire with us."

If we could just take some time to slow down and look around, I think we would be very encouraged by what we would see with our spiritual eyes and what we would hear with spiritual ears from those who have gone before us and finished the race.

I'm telling you, "Look around"! We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...that term "cloud" here represents a GREAT number of witnesses...more than we can count!

I believe these witnesses surrounding us are NOT just those in Hebrews 11, but ALL those that have gone before us in faith. For me:

- It's my great grandparents...
- My grandparents...
- People like Mike Fechner, Joe Perry, Joyce Shoebridge, Damon Shook, Wallace Perry...

Who is it for you? Just take some time this week to close your eyes and look around. When the race is tough...when you want to quit...when you don't think you can go any further, look around and see those that have gone before – you CAN keep going! You CAN keep enduring!

Don't focus on how tough the race is, focus on the fact that if others finished by faith, you can too!

Illus. Church/Life Group important – allows you to look around! We're in this together! Get to know people – amazing stories in this room! (Hugh Miller – so encouraged!) Your focus determines your finish...look around at the great cloud of witnesses and it will sharpen your focus! But looking around isn't enough to finish strong. We also need to:

2. Look Within

Heb. 12:1b – "...let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely..."

I like how the NIV puts this...it says "let us throw off everything that hinders..."

Now, things that weigh us down in our running...that hinder us from focusing on our race could be good things or bad things.

The point the writer is making is that ANYTHING that prevents our focus...ANYTHING that impedes us from running with endurance – it's got to go!

So, look within and ask God to show you what is slowing your progress...what is preventing you from running as effectively as you could be running?

What is it for you? ANYTHING can hinder us! Again, it doesn't have to be "bad" things necessarily. It can be a:

- Relationship...

- Entertainment...
- Hobbies and interests...

Again, none of these things are inherently wrong or bad, but if our focus is too much on these things, they will prevent us from finishing strong...they CAN BE “weights” that hold us down.

For some it’s busyness...what’s the quote? “If Satan can’t make you bad, he’ll make you busy”. And busyness...doing good things can keep us from focusing on what is MOST important! Filling up our calendars and over-extending ourselves can hinder us and hold us back from running as intentionally and purposefully as God desires.

You look at runners that train and run for long distance...they are wearing thin shorts...thin shirts...light shoes...they “lay aside” any weight that could keep hold them down...slow them down.

Ask God this week in your time alone with him:

- What is it that you need to lay aside?
- What is it that you need to throw off?

Not only does he deal with morally neutral things here that can throw our focus off and keep us from running effectively, but he writes also that we should “lay aside” or “throw off the sin which clings so closely”.

Again, the NIV says, “the sin that so easily entangles” – it’s a word picture of a spider spinning its web. It’s a perfect picture of sin, isn’t it?

Sin ensnares...it trips us up...it so easily entangles. Rather than crucifying the sin, we coddle it, and then all of the sudden we find ourselves entangled in it – we’re caught up in it wondering why we can’t run!

This is how insidious sin is! We “get away” with a little bit of it here and there, and we don’t think that our sin will catch up to us! We don’t think it’s affecting us or our relationships – (that’s not true by the way) – we are NOT getting away with it and to think that we are we are deceiving ourselves! And we WILL one day reap what we sow! What’s done in secret will be shouted from the rooftops (Luke 12:3)!

And what happens is we sin and all of the sudden, we’re wrapped up in it thinking, “how did I get here?!”

And we’re NOT finishing strong because our focus is off...our focus is on us! And this is the essence of sin – SELF at the center! And when self is at the center, you can’t run!

Illus. 3-Legged Race – Field Day – it was impossible to go fast and far in the 3-legged race! Why? You are tied up! You’ve got someone else connected to you!

Well, the same is true in life regarding sin! It’s impossible to go fast and go far tied up in sin.

I’m telling you, some you need to hear this word today! God is calling you to repentance...he is waking you up! The trajectory for some of you finishing strong, if your race was over TODAY – it isn’t looking very good BECAUSE you have some sin in your life that has you wrapped up!

It has so distracted your focus from following hard after God...you think you have it under control, but the fact is, it HAS you under its control! And the word for you today is look within and by the power of the Holy Spirit determine what is hindering you and what sin is do you need to lay aside so you can run the race God has set for you!

Our focus determines our finish.

Lay aside the weights...throw off the sin. And let me just say this before moving on:

Some of you right now feel the weight of your sin. You're tangled up and you don't know how to get free. Hear me: Jesus specializes in untangling people from their sin. Come to him by faith and in humility. Confess this sin – name it! He is faithful and just to forgive. He can and by his grace will deliver you and put you right back in the race!

We look around...we look within. Thirdly, we:

3. Look ahead

Heb. 12:1 – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

There is a race that is SET BEFORE US! Notice, we are to run with endurance and perseverance the race that is SET BEFORE US.

This means...you have a race. It means I have a race. And to run this race, if we are to persevere and endure, we don't look to the right or to the left...we're looking ahead to the finish! We are looking ahead to our future reward.

Recall how often this future reward...this “hope” ...the “future city” ...what was PROMISED was mentioned in Heb. 11 (v. 8-10, 13-15, 39).

ALL of these verses speak to a future promise...a future reward...this is the goal they were after and this is what kept them going by faith!

- To hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant” ...
- To see Jesus, face to face...
- To be reunited with those who've gone before them...
- To live forever and ever with God in the new city where there is no more tears or pain or death...

This is what these saints of old focused on...what was in front of them...ahead of them...and this is what allowed them to persevere and keep going! AND this is what we're running toward!

Many of us aren't running in a way that we will wind up finishing strong because our focus is NOT on what's ahead...in the race that is set before us, but instead it's to the side looking at the race that has been set before someone else.

We can't focus on our race because we are focused on someone else's!

- Look at what they get to do!

- Look at what they don't have to deal with!
- Look at how much help they are getting!
- Why can't my race be more like there's?

You'll never finish strong if you are not focused on what's ahead...at the end of YOUR race! This race is personal...it's like a fingerprint. The race that God sets before you is unlike any other race he sets before others.

Illus. Card in Bible – “Run MY Race”

We can't finish our race strong if we are focused on what someone else is doing next to us. You've...we've all got to stay in our lane looking ahead...focused on that future reward.

If we want our focus to be dialed in and sharp, we have to look around. We need to look within. We need to look ahead...

BTW - This means we are not looking back at better days wishing we could just go back when we were running well...it means we are not looking back in shame or regret at decisions or choices we have made.

Instead, we do what the writer of Hebrews said...we look ahead...to the race set before us...to the reward that is before us.

Recall the words of Paul in: **Phil. 3:13-15a – “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way...”**

Our focus determines our finish and for our focus to remain strong so that we finish strong: We look around. We look within. We look ahead.

And then finally...what ALL this really leads to is, we need to:

4. Look up

This of course means we look to Jesus.

Heb. 12:2-3 – “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.”

This is what it's all about and where all the focus needs to be! On Jesus.

The word “looking” here means “to gaze...to stare deeply”. This is what keeps us going! We are to be laser-focused on Jesus.

Why? Because Jesus is the “founder and perfecter of our faith”. Some of your Bibles use the word “author” – it's a word that means “pioneer” ...it's the idea of a “trailblazer”!

He ran the race first! It just makes sense to look to him and focus on him in order to finish strong. He's the ultimate example we can follow.

When we look to him, we see HOW he finished his race – the scripture says it was because of the “joy set before him”.

Talk about enduring...he was able to run and finish because he was doing exactly what he talked about earlier – he was looking ahead!

It was joy – to obey the Father...to know he was redeeming us and was providing a way for us to be with him forever – it was the joy that was set before him that enabled him to endure the shame...he was focused!

What a great example to us...how we finish our race...complete our race! All these other examples (Heb. 11) are awesome, but they are NOT Jesus – so, we gaze at him...we look to him.

And listen to why the writer says we need to keep looking to Jesus (v. 3) – “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, SO THAT you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Did you catch that? We consider him – think on him – LOOK to him SO THAT you may not grow weary or fainthearted. When you're exhausted in the race...when you want to quit...when you're ready to throw in the towel – what's the antidote?

CONSIDER JESUS. Look to HIM and what HE endured. Look at the hostility he faced. He kept going!

- When we look to Jesus, we won't give up...we may be tired, but looking to Jesus is what strengthens us!
- When we look to him by faith, this is where we get strong...this is where we get inspired...this is HOW we don't lose heart.

If Jesus can endure the cross...the shame...the betrayal...the physical agony...the spiritual weight of our sin - then by his strength, we can endure whatever we're facing in our race!

Look to Jesus SO THAT you won't grow weary. Look to Jesus SO THAT you won't lose heart. THIS is why our focus determines our finish. When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we find the strength to keep going!

Illus. Eyes on Jesus – personal motto!

- This means we STAY in his word – ABIDE!
- This means we give ourselves totally to him – this is real worship! My life is yours!

When we look to him, we see that he was/is completely committed to us! He went to the cross and saved us...and he finished his race via the cross and resurrection and is now (v. 3) “seated at the right hand of the throne of God”.

Translation: Race is over. Job is complete!

Illus. Sitting down – at the end of a hard day – “it is finished”! He's the perfect example for us. Look to him!

Illus. Marathon Runners – “hitting a wall” – I’ve never ran long enough to hit the wall! You don’t quit at mile 20!!!

Maybe you’ve hit a wall in your Christian journey. If so:

- Look around at the witnesses...they have gone before us and are encouraging us on the journey...
- Look within and by God’s grace get rid of anything hindering you from running well and throw off that sin that is weighing you down...
- Look ahead and stay in your lane...run your race...this is YOUR race...
- Look up and set your eyes on Jesus – gaze at him...focus on him.

And I’m telling you when you focus on these things, you’ll have a finishing faith.

Champion Forest, we’ve been talking about MORE all Fall...we want MORE faith...MORE of Christ’s presence in our life and in our church...we want MORE of a move of God in our city.

Illus. First time I heard this passage preached (spotlight)

Let’s pray.

Invitation: For 11-12 weeks now, you’ve heard me preach on faith. In this final message...isn’t it true? Some of you have never entered this race. You’re not running yet because you’ve never trusted Jesus as Savior. Today is your day to start.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.