

Part 5, Thur (Toronto Spiritual Life Convention 1993)

by Eric J. Alexander

The sermon emphasizes the importance of perseverance in the Christian life, as emphasized in Hebrews 12:1-2, and encourages listeners to throw off hindrances and sin, and to fix their eyes on Jesus.

Duration: 45:39

Scripture: Exodus 3:6, John 10:28-29, Romans 8:28, Romans 8:38-39, Hebrews 12:1-2

Topics: "Faith And Perseverance", "Christian Endurance"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on three exhortations found in Hebrews 12:1-2. The first exhortation is to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that easily entangles us. This is important in preparing ourselves for perseverance in the race of faith. The second exhortation is to run with perseverance, just like the great cloud of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews 11, who endured great hardships and persecution. The third exhortation is to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of God. The speaker emphasizes that these exhortations are not just historical accounts, but lessons for us to learn about the character of God and how he works in our lives.

Transcript

It would be impossible, of course, for me to express properly my deep gratitude for the enormous privilege of these days in Toronto. I have greatly valued and appreciated renewing again friendships that are more dear to me than I could express, and to have the opportunity of this fellowship and of people who are willing to sit for really what is quite a long time to listen to me. I was hearing of one young man who had never had to take down eight points in his notes until last night, and I think he gave up halfway through, but I am deeply grateful for your patience in listening so well.

I'm very thankful for the fellowship of so many within the council of this convention, and I delight in the opportunity of being in Toronto again. I'm not sure whether I brought this cold here or picked it up in Toronto, but I assure you I'll take it back to Glasgow tomorrow with your warm good wishes to my family. Let me just say to you that I greatly envy you, if it is a proper thing to do, having Alistair Begg here next year.

He is a very dear friend of mine and had an outstanding ministry in the west of Scotland. He has been the one man that Dr. Griffith's former church in Edinburgh greatly wanted to be their pastor, and he is in Cleveland in Ohio, and God has greatly blessed and used him, and I'm sure you're going to be greatly blessed in the grace and goodness of God next year with his ministry. Now let me ask you to turn again to the Word of God with me, to Hebrews chapter 12, and principally to the first two verses of that chapter.

Over these three evenings we have been considering together the great theme of Christian assurance or Christian certainty, the theme of the eternal security of the believer in Christ. On Tuesday evening we concentrated on Paul's great affirmation in Romans 8, 28. We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Last evening we sought to understand the great and Jesus' uncompromising words regarding those who are his sheep. They, he says, shall never perish. No man can pluck them out of my hands.

But in the perfect balance of scripture I want us to come this evening to another emphasis that God sets before us in this whole general theme of the perseverance of the believer, and that is the exhortation that we receive and which we read at the beginning of Hebrews chapter 12, an exhortation to the believer to persevere in the Christian race. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us. You see, it would be possible for us to listen to these great affirmations of Paul and of Jesus and to draw a false conclusion, namely, that since we can never perish and no one can pluck us out of Jesus Christ's hands and no one can take us from the Father's hands, then since it is true that nothing can separate us from the love of God who is working all things together for good to those who love him, there is therefore every reason for us to cease from any kind of effort and simply to recognize the inevitability of our being carried by a long to glory in the fullness of time, no matter how we live.

And undoubtedly, that would be a logical conclusion to draw, but it would certainly not be a biblical conclusion to draw. And it is a very important thing that we should draw our conclusions about Christian truth from Scripture as well as eliciting the truth itself. And it would be important for us, if we had to choose, to be biblical and illogical rather than to be logical and unbiblical.

And I want to press upon you what is really the biblical conclusion to what we have been considering together on these last two evenings. And the biblical conclusion is this exhortation the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews gives to us in Hebrews 12, 1 and 2. It is, if you look more closely at it, in fact, three exhortations rather than one. And they each begin with the words, let us.

In verse 1, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Secondly, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Thirdly, let us run with perseverance 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, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Now these are the three exhortations I want us to listen to this evening and see how they become, in biblical terms, the logical outcome of the great truths that we have been considering on these last two evenings. The second of these three exhortations is obviously the central one in every sense, and I want us to look at it first. Let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us.

This idea of perseverance is, of course, a very common one in the New Testament. The word is often translated patience or endurance, and God's people are urged again and again to have patience and endurance in the way they live out this glorious life that God has given to us in Jesus Christ. Now what does it mean, then, this word perseverance? Well, you may have found, if you have studied the Bible, that you can often tell a great deal about a word, as you can about people, by the company that they keep.

And this particular word is generally found in a certain context. It is found in company with one or other of two ideas or metaphors. One is a military metaphor, where the idea of perseverance means fighting to the end of the battle and not desisting from deserting the field, going on whatever the pains, whatever the opposition, until the day when the victory is won.

That is the first general background against which you find this word. And, of course, the Christian life is likened to a battle, to a warfare, and it is part of Paul's thinking about Christian experience, for example, that he describes it in these terms. The other background is an athletic one, where the word perseverance is used to describe the kind of runner who enters upon the race with his eyes set upon the goal, and goes on to the very end, and never drops out or leaves the field.

And these two backgrounds fill in for us the significance of this word, perseverance. Here in Hebrews twelve, it is obviously the athletic metaphor that the apostle is using. And he is urging these Hebrew believers to live their lives like those who have entered upon and committed themselves to a long-distance race.

This is not some kind of short sprint. It is not the hundred meters dash that he is speaking of. It is probably the marathon race.

It is a long-distance race. And the point of the idea of perseverance is that not just as we begin, but right through until the very end, we are to persevere. We are to keep going on, and by God's grace, in the end of the day, to receive the crown or the prize.

Now you will know, of course, that the apostle Paul uses both of these pictures of the Christian life, and indeed brings them together at the very end of his own Christian pilgrimage. And he describes them in a military and athletic form. I have fought the good fight.

I have finished the race. Now this is the characteristic language that Paul uses to describe his Christian pilgrimage. Now these examples of persevering faith in chapter 11 of Hebrews are not only examples of a long-distance race.

You think of how the writer in this chapter that leads into the exhortation in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12 describes for us some of these great men of God in the past who have gone on year after year, decade after decade, and the great mark of their life was that they persevered to the end. But their life was not simply a marathon race. It was also an obstacle race in so many circumstances.

If you just look a little before the twelfth chapter, for example, in verses 36 and 37 of chapter 11, you will see how he describes some of these people who are amongst the great cloud of witnesses who bear witness to God's persevering grace in their own lives. What was the nature of the race they ran? Well, he says, some faced jeers and flogging while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned.

They were sawed in two. They were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated.

The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. This is the characteristic of the race that they ran.

And the great testimony of their lives is that they persevered. Now, the really important thing about that great cloud of witnesses is what they witnessed to. Let me emphasize to you that they did not witness to their own extraordinary powers of endurance.

One of the characteristic marks of biblical biography is that it is woven through and through with reality and honesty. The great figure who dominates Hebrews 11, for example, is Abraham. And when you go into the book of Genesis, you discover Abraham with all his frailties, with the evidence of cowardice and weakness and fear and selfishness, ready to sacrifice his wife for his own safety.

You find so many things in the biographical account of Abraham. And what God is saying to us when He sets Abraham, the man of faith, before us is not what a great figure Abraham is, what a man of endurance, what remarkable native powers he must have had. The thing that God is setting before us is for such an ordinary, frail vessel like this.

What a glorious God this man had. What a mighty Redeemer and Savior Jehovah proved Himself to be to a man like Abraham. And very obviously, what they witnessed to is what faith witnesses to.

And you will know that faith witnesses to its object, the greatness and faithfulness and the supernatural power of God who enabled them to persevere. Now, this is the secret of perseverance. It is what lies behind this exhortation, else it would be an exhortation of despair.

But when the writer is pointing out the perseverance of Moses to us, do you notice what he says in verse 27? By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger. He persevered, how? Because he saw him who is invisible. So the great encouragement of these men and women of faith who are cataloged for us and whose history is described for us in Hebrews 11, the great encouragement is that they are ordinary people who have an extraordinary God.

And we are summoned and exhorted to persevere in the same way that they persevered as seeing Him who is invisible. This of course is one of the great lessons of Scripture about the proper use of history, you know. It's one of the great reasons for acquainting yourself with the historical sections of the Old Testament.

It is one of the reasons that God introduces Himself in terms of His own historical mighty acts. Have you ever noticed this? He says, I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. I am the God who brought you up out of the Red Sea and from the land of Egypt.

And He begins to recite to them an historical record of His mighty acts in history. Now He does not that for us, not merely in order that we might be acquainted with history from the past. The great use of history is that we might recognize the character of God.

That's what these great sections of Scripture are for. They are to bring us to an understanding of the way God works in time in order that we may discover that what He has done for them, He will do for us. So He says, let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us.

And the second exhortation is this, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin which so easily entangles. Now that is clearly a vital exhortation for how we are to prepare ourselves for this quality of

prayer. And perseverance, you will know that it's an essential element in running any kind of race that we have serious preparation for it.

And here the writer of the epistle is describing for us the kind of clothing which is suitable for those who are serious about persevering in the Christian life. You will know how the apostle Paul uses the same figure of speech when he describes a certain kind of clothing which is appropriate to living as Christian people. So he says, put off this particular kind of clothing.

Put off this and put off that and put on various other forms of clothing. He is describing Christian character of clothing. He says, this is the suitable clothing for living the life of a redeemed child of God.

Now here you will notice the writer of Hebrews is urging those who are serious about the Christian race to get rid of whatever would be in the nature of impedimenta, of hindrances to running the race. You will be familiar with the fact that in the Olympic games to this day the contestants come down to the track wearing all kinds of clothing, some of them with quite heavy suits, track suits on. But very soon and before the race is even called you will see them peeling off one layer after another until they are stripped for action.

Now of course the reason is that they are serious about this business. This is not something they take casually. This is not something they view lightly.

They really mean to go for the tape. And so they lay aside whatever will hinder them. And it is an obvious lesson that the apostle is teaching us.

You think of it this way. If you were to see someone come down onto the track in some great gathering for athletic games and those who had trained for months and months and were now standing waiting for the race to begin and were peeling off these outer layers of their track suits were joined by somebody who had a heavy overcoat on and was carrying suitcases. They would look and say somebody needs to go down and clear the track of that man.

He is presenting a ludicrous sight. Now if you think of it for a moment it is not because there is anything ludicrous about somebody wearing an overcoat and carrying suitcases. It is what he is professing to do that makes his situation ludicrous.

And there are many Christian believers who profess to be Christ's who present a similarly ludicrous spectacle as they come to the business of running the Christian race. And they carry all the impedimenta of a lifestyle and of standards and of priorities that would disqualify them from beginning. So the apostle says there are things that need to be left behind.

There are hindrances that you need to throw off and you need to be quite radical and ruthless. Now there is somebody who has a sense of priorities for a most corruptible crown. But my dear friends you and I are running this glorious race.

And when you look back into Hebrews chapter 11 and see what some of these people gladly laid aside in order that they might persevere. A man like Abraham for example. Have you ever thought of what he came from in Ur of the Chaldees when he heard the voice of God and was called out of that land of great sophistication as the archaeologists tell us.

And great progress and great comfort. And went at the bidding of God not knowing where he was going but with the summons of another world in his soul. And he counted nothing as precious to him and

everything as loss in order that he might set out on the race.

And when the time came when even his very own son had God's hand laid on him and God said to him go up into the mountain and sacrifice your son your only son Isaac if ever there was an illogical thing that was it. God had gathered all his promises in this boy and now he is saying to Abraham take him and take him to the altar and there sacrifice him. And Abraham because he was set upon persevering to the end in this race the writer of the epistle says to us he took his son his only son Isaac.

And he offered him as a sacrifice he who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son even though God had said to him it is through Isaac that your offspring will be called. And Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead and figuratively speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. But he was ready even to sacrifice him.

Now this is what putting aside everything that might hinder and the one thing that hinders is disobedience and that links in with the other half of what the writer of Hebrew says on the sin that so easily entangles. You see one of the ways in which God's people persevere to the end my dear people is when they become ruthless with sin in their own lives. We do not live in a society where that is popular today or where the doctrine of mortification of sin is one that is often spoken or discussed amongst us.

But I tell you it is one of the vital things for persevering gloriously to the end that we not only take God seriously in his glorious promises but that we take sin seriously and are absolutely ruthless with it in our lives. You cannot persevere in the Christian race entangled by the sin that so easily besets us. So the apostle says let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.

Now you know sometimes I think that if we find ourselves stuck at this point going to hinder me in this business of running the race I have to put it aside. I have to be ruthless in mortifying non-sin. Well you know if we do get stuck with that it is because we have not begun to grasp the sheer and infinite wonder of the glory that God is setting before us in Jesus Christ.

My dear friends if the poor tinsel of our sin, if the attractions of this present world hold us back it is because we have not grasped the glory for which we were created and redeemed which God sets before us. I am amazed when I hear men like Nick Faldo who say they are ready to sacrifice almost anything and God knows the man has already sacrificed one marriage in the interest of golf and for the interest of the glory of God and the glories of his kingdom of grace we say oh but I could scarcely let that thing go. God help us we have not begun to get life in perspective have we? Well says the apostle let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Now finally let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith possibly the most important of these three exhortations. Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Let us throw aside everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles but now what is it that our eyes are to be upon? What is the whole form and manner of our life as we are running this race? Well some have suggested it is that great cloud of witnesses.

We are to look at them and take encouragement from them. Well of course in a very real sense we are. Our perseverance is greatly helped by recognizing what they testify to but I say to you again what they testify to is not their own extraordinary powers it is the extraordinary glory of God.

To which they testify and so says the apostle let us fix, let us fix our eyes on Jesus. You know what it is like when there is someone or something in a room and you find your gaze drawn away to them or a picture of some sort and you find your eyes taken away from everything else and you are captivated by this. Well now if you have begun to grasp what it is to be one of Christ's sheep purchased by his blood kept by his hands nail pierced then you will begin to know something of the captivating wonder of the Lord Jesus Christ and you will find your eyes more and more as you grow in grace fixed upon him and this is the whole manner of our living says the apostle as we run this race.

What does it mean for us to fix our eyes on Jesus? Well of course it means to fix our eyes upon him as our example. That's carried in what the apostle is saying when he 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 and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. If ever there is an example of perseverance it is in the Lord Jesus.

No one ever persevered as he did. No one ever endured what he endured and yet he did it with his eyes set on the goal of pleasing his father and fulfilling the work the father had given to him and he is a great example of course of perseverance. But I don't think that's primarily what the apostle is concerned with.

I think what he is primarily concerned with is that we should fix our eyes upon Jesus as the one who is the key to our persevering. All that we need as frail, weak, needy children of God in this fallen world to persevere to the end is found in Jesus Christ. How does he speak of him? Do you notice? Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and the perfecter of our faith.

Now do you see this double anchor for the child of God? Where did all this begin for me? Do you ever ask yourself that? Here I am as a child of God this evening. Where did all this begin? Now you might rightly say to me it began on the 21st of October 1979. I remember it so well that occasion.

That's true. Blessed be God if you are able to rejoice in that this evening. I personally could not tell you a date and time when I was brought to faith through grace but I tell you the infinitely truer truth is that all this began for you before the foundation of the world when the Lord Jesus Christ from all eternity set his heart upon you.

Now you and I will never begin to understand that. We will never fathom what it means that the Lord of glory set his heart upon us and was the author of our faith before he was the creator of the world. It was he who began it.

Now that in no sense means that in any way did Jesus believe for you. He summons us to repentance and faith but it does mean that the origin of all this work of God began grace in my life is in the eternal counsels of God and in the work of Jesus Christ. He began it.

He is the author of our faith and I bless God for that this evening my dear friends that my eternal hope does not rest on some flimsy thing that I have done but on the glorious thing that God in Jesus Christ has done as the author of my faith. I am here this evening as a child of God for the same reason that you are there as a child of God and that is he came to seek and to save that which was lost. But if he is the author of it you notice the other thing.

He is the finisher, the perfecter, the one who will complete our faith. That's exactly what the apostle Paul is saying of course in Philippians 1 6 when he says I am persuaded that he who began a good work in you

will go on to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. That's how we know we persevere.

That's how we know that if we are children of God then we shall one day assuredly see him face to face in glory. It is because our God is a God who never leaves unfinished work, who never does have unfinished symphonies. What he begins he completes for his glory.

Do you know the way he does that? Notice what the apostle 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, counting its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. I want to tell you this evening as we close that this is not simply a promise God gives to us.

That would be enough. It would be quite sufficient if he said to us what I have begun I will complete. I will never leave the work of grace I have started in you incomplete.

But he tells us that the same Lord Jesus Christ who was the Lord Jesus Christ who endured the cross and despised the shame and went to Calvary in our place and died our death and bore our judgment. He ascended to the throne of God. And what is he doing there by the way? What does this epistle to the end tell us? It tells us what the Hebrews tell us.

He is doing there at the right hand of God the Father he ever lives to make intercession for us. And what is the significance of that? He is able to save to the uttermost all those who come unto God by him because he ever lives to make intercession for them. Now that is true of every child of God here in this building this evening.

That tonight even while we meet here the risen exalted Lord Jesus Christ is at the right hand of God the Father pleading our cause and doing for us what he said to Simon Peter Simon he said, Satan has desired to have you that he might sift you like wheat but I have prayed for you that your faith will not fail. Oh beloved what a Savior Jesus Christ is. What a glorious completeness there is in everything that I have done for you that God has done in Christ for our sake.

There is just nothing that he has not thought about. Do you know how you sometimes tell a secret to my wife? You have thought about everything. There is not a tiny detail that has gone past your notice.

You have thought about everything now. If you take that and baptize it into Christ and multiply it by infinity we have a God who has thought about absolutely everything and he sits this evening on the throne of the universe and what he has begun he will finish more happy but not more secure the glorified spirits in heaven. Oh therefore we may say to God and allow one another to overhear as we go this evening we rest on thee and in thy name we go and I tell you my friends you can go anywhere.

There is not a place in God's earth. There is not a circumstance known to humankind which you cannot face if such a God is your God and such a Savior is your Savior. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For such a Savior and for such a Gospel. Let us pray.

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