



Roanoke, Virginia

July 19, 2020

“Encouragement”

Hebrews 12:1-17

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¹² Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
⁶ for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.”

⁷ Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? ⁸ If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. ⁹ Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.



¹² Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

¹⁴ Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. ¹⁶ See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent,^[d] even though he sought the blessing with tears.

If you think it is sad to hear an ex-athlete talk about the glory days, prepare to be sad.

I was a senior in college and a pretty good cross-country runner, usually finishing second or third on my team. The best runner on my team that year was a freshman phenom. During one race, I was entering the last mile when I was shocked to see that I was not only gaining ground on him but if things kept developing like they were, I was going to pass him with about half a mile to go. I couldn't believe it; I'm telling you, the guy was really good. Yes, I was having one of my better days, but I could see he was struggling.

I didn't know the guy well. Many cross-country runners are loners, and he was one who kept to himself. But though we were not friends, I wanted to be a good teammate. So, when I caught up with him, I offered him some encouraging words, suggesting to him that I pace him. So, I said, “*Stay with me and we'll finish strong.*” He looked at me and said two words that I can't repeat, but it was clear he did not appreciate my encouragement.

At that point, my *best* self gave way to my *worse* self. He stopped being a teammate and became just a freshman again. I picked up my pace and dusted him. (Telling you that last part didn't need to be in the sermon, but I enjoy telling it.)

I guess people are motivated in different ways. I ran my best because of other runners. I would tie an invisible cord between me and a runner ahead of me. I would either slowly pull the runner to me until I could pass him or at least hang on to the cord so I would not be left behind.

I think the preacher of Hebrews was a runner. In fact, I think the preacher was a runner like me, and not like that rude freshman. I don't have any evidence to go by except chapter 11, the chapter before the chapter I read as our scripture lesson. With the sermon that is the book of Hebrews, the preacher wants to inspire his congregation to be faithful even when they are tired. He does so by describing one's life as a race; not a race of *loners*, but of *teammates*. What he describes is that kind of race where runners absolutely need each other to finish. He describes a *relay*.

Each runner carries the baton that is faith... not any faith, but the faith of patriarchs, of judges, of priests of prophets, and now the faith of apostles and followers of Jesus. Each leg of the relay is not a short sprint, but the long race of a lifetime after one has been claimed by God. This is a relay of marathons where the runners might stumble, fall, falter and even sometimes get off the trail, but who can't stop until their leg of the race is done.



The preacher tells his congregation of the runners who have carried the baton of faith before them. Just to list a few:

- By faith, Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice.
- By faith, Noah built the ark.
- By faith, Abraham went to the new land God showed him, and trusted God with his son.
- By faith, Moses stood before Pharaoh as if he had no fear.
- By faith, Rahab, hid the spies of Israel.

The preacher goes into some detail about each of those runners, but after describing Rahab, the preacher stops telling stories. He is building toward a crescendo, now just firing off names in the rapid-fire style of rap: “By faith:

Gideon,
Barak,
Samson,
Jephthah,
David,
Samuel...

Then the preacher is moving so fast, he stops calling names and starts throwing out categories—prophets, women, others who suffered for the sake of righteousness—the baton passing from one runner to another, from one generation to the next, *until...*

the moment when the preacher reminds the congregation that the baton is now in their hands.

It is the moment of chapter 12. It is the moment where the preacher comes up on the right side of his congregation and offers them words of encouragement. He begins with these words:

“*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 perseverance* the race that is set before us.*”

The preacher goes on, and it is good he does. If that is all that the preacher has to say, it is just *cheerleading*. It’s what might help a long-distance runner on the very last leg of the race when the cheers of a crowd can carry a runner to ignore the pain and sprint to the end. But this cheering, on its own, is not enough in the middle of a race when someone is tired and wondering if he *can even finish*.

We don’t know specifically why the congregation is tired because the preacher doesn’t say. Scholars guess that this is a Christian congregation, possibly in Jerusalem, made up mostly of Jews who now follow Jesus. As a minority community, they have to live against the grain, put up sometimes with being ridiculed, marginalized and dismissed—sometimes even physically abused. Their temptation is to buy into the cultural notion that the race is over, that there is no leg of the race that begins with Jesus’ resurrection—that they have run too far. They are tempted to say, “Our bad. We don’t really buy into the empty grave.”



Again, though, those are guesses based on reading a book called “Hebrews,” that speaks so much of Jewish forebearers, and which makes such a point of speaking of finding God in Jesus.

While for those of us who like knowing the original context of writings it is disappointing not to know the specifics, there can be an advantage. Maybe the undefined spiritual weariness of that congregation can find definition in the spiritual weariness we sometimes feel...

Maybe *these* days more than most days. I’m not going to talk too much today about current events, but would you agree that this Jumanji game that we are in called 2020 has not been a nice stretch of downhill running... more like running uphill... *in sand*. I know, it has not been all bad, there have been blessings and joys, and probably some extreme introverts have been coasting through 2020 with a smile on their faces. But I bet there have been some like me who laugh a bit too hard when someone says something like this: “2020 is a leap year that had 29 days in February and 3,000 days in March.”

For some of us, this year has been exhausting.

I suggest we listen to Tom Long. In his commentary on Hebrews, he suggested that even without knowing the specifics it seems the congregation is tired not so much of being sinners or being saints. “What they are tired of is the *struggle between the two; the constant warfare that trying to be faithful entails.*” Another way to say that might be: “What they are tired of is the struggle between their best and worst selves.”

That makes sense on a simple level. Making your bed every night, or not making it every night—both are easier than deciding *every single day* whether or not to make your bed. Going to church every Sunday and never going to church, praying regularly and hardly praying at all—both easier than making the decision every single time.

I’m talking like a preacher now. As long as I am, listen to this story about a preacher. A minister-friend of mine told this story on himself in a sermon. Even so, I’m changing his name to “Tim.”

Tim used to wear a clerical collar all the time. He said it was more a fashion choice than a professional one because it saved him the effort of deciding every day what he was going to wear. He went to visit one of his members in the hospital. Visiting was easy, he loved the member and she was glad to have him there for conversation... for prayer. That visit was a great way to end his day on the job.

Then, while driving home from the hospital, ready to relax at home, he approached a stop light. He lived in a big city and this was a busy four lane street. Someone waiting to pull into the street from a business saw him coming and all the cars behind him and decided not to wait. He screeched out in front of Tim forcing him to slam on his brakes. The guy ahead gave him a little backwards wave as if to say, “Yeah, I see you. Big deal.”

Tim was furious and expressed with a hand gesture what that freshman runner said to me in two words. With his hand still in the air, Tim suddenly became aware there was another driver stopped beside him. He turned and saw a wide-eyed elderly woman. It that moment, Tim remembered *his clerical collar*.

Being his best self during the hospital visit was easy. Being his worst self responding to the driver was easy. What would have been hard is remembering he was wearing his collar before



making the hand gesture. His best and worst selves would have been in conflict, his fury and his calling pulling against each other. I'll used the word: one would have been in *judgement* of the other.

Of course, preachers are not the only ones who struggle between their best and worst selves. You may have heard in the news about a CEO of a California software company. I don't know the guy, but I imagine that when he is on the job, it is easy for him to act professionally—especially at board meetings or stockholder meetings. He is careful about what he says and is careful how he says it.

But after work he goes to an outside bar, drinks too much, and is tired. Maybe he is sick and tired of having to deal with the coronavirus and maybe he has some pent-up rage that has been stoked by the voices of the culture wars. He can't let China have it, but there is this Asian family in front of him having too good a time celebrating a birthday. He engages them, makes fun of them, insults and threatens them, gives them that rude gesture and says those two words. He looks like he is enjoying himself.

Easy to be professional at work. Easy now to be rude in the restaurant.

But what if it occurred to him that the video being recorded by the phone in the hand of one of the family members might soon be seen by his family... by the board and stockholders of his company? Then, maybe it would have been hard for a tired man who drank too much having to make the effort to restrain himself, but maybe that struggle would have saved him the job he would lose the next week.

You see, sometimes cheerleading is not enough. Sometimes encouragement has to go beyond "Keep it up," to being reminded that we are accountable.

That is what the preacher is reminding us in chapter 12. He reminds the congregation that we are never in this world unobserved and unaccountable. In three ways, he reminds the congregation that they are in the presence of others, and they are accountable.

First, he says we need to remember those who have run before: Abel, Abraham, Moses, Rahab and the like. They endured so much and made so many sacrifices. We owe something to them, just as I owe a great deal to the ancestors, parents, teachers, friends, mentors and peers who passed on to me my faith and wisdom how to live. As a preacher, I need to remember those who built up the wonderful congregations I was so fortunate to be called to serve.

Who would be those people for you? Who are those who passed on a vision of a realm where people are treated with dignity, where the weak and vulnerable are helped and protected, and who sometimes made a faithful witness at some considerable sacrifice and cost? "[We can't let them down,](#)" the preacher is saying.

Second, the preacher reminds us the leg of the relay we are running is not the last. There are those who will one day receive the baton:

generations to come;

children and grandchildren—

not only our own, if we have them,

but God's own children and grandchildren,

for all are children of God.

We are accountable to those to come.



Then, third and finally, the preacher reminds us that even though the baton is now ours, *we do not run alone*. Jesus is running the race with us.

On the one hand, that means even without people taking videos, that makes you accountable. We live in the eyes of God—in the eyes of Jesus. Morally, ethically—you can't live *unseen*. If our faith tells us anything, it is that. Jesus may look at us with love, but Jesus' eyes are bright with hope to see us grow into the image of our best selves—the image of who we were created to be.

But, being seen by Jesus also means that we are encouraged. “Jesus,” the preacher says, “*is running ahead of us.*” Remember that cord I imagined attached to a runner ahead of me? The preacher is describing that cord when he says, “*Look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He endured the cross, rejected the shame, and now is risen among us. Hold on. Pull yourself toward him and join your strength to his. Because he is kind, truthful, loving and gracious even when it is hard, even when it comes at great cost. He'll help us do the same even when we are tired of being our best selves.*”

Let's remember what is the greatest cause of spiritual exhaustion. It is trying to live your best life alone and without hope.

If I can just for a moment go back to 2020 and how difficult I have found this year to be, I think it helps to know first, that there are a lot of people who have gone before who have had it worse. And second, it helps to remember that God can help us do now what he has helped so many do before: emerge

from struggle to strength,
from bondage to freedom,
from death to new life.

With how we live, with the decisions we make, and with the hope we bear, let's hang in there with the one who leads us to joy. Let's stay with Jesus, and we'll finish strong.

