

Hebrews 12:1-2

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[0 : 00] Turn to Hebrews chapter 12 and verses 1-2. I suppose I wanted to preach a New Year sermon.! These verses would be great verses to learn, wouldn't they, for you and I. Hebrews 12 and verses 1-2.

! I'm going to begin a series next week in the book of Philippians, and so maybe you want to read that this week. But today, Philippians chapter 12 and verses 1-2. Some of you are very young, aren't you? Some of you are very old, aren't you?

Some of you are very old. And I expect children, you look around you, and some of you will look around and you'll think, these people are ancient, aren't they? These people are ancient.

I want to speak, really, this morning on how do you keep going? How do you keep going as a Christian when you're very young and when you're very old?

The theme, the big word is perseverance. That's the big word. How do you persevere? How can I keep on going? I expect some of you are sitting here this morning, you've got through Christmas, you're exhausted, and the thought of a new year doesn't actually fill you with great joy. You think, how can I keep on going?

[1 : 34] Maybe you've got many worries, anxieties about life on this coming year. And there are many things that are needed to live and to serve God in our world, but it seems to me that none of them are more vital or more neglected by the church than this big theme of perseverance.

In a way, it's the theme of the whole of the letter of Hebrews. The letter of the Hebrews is written to a group of Christians who are living in days which were pretty dangerous for them spiritually.

And the danger of drifting, spiritually drifting, was an ever-present danger. In fact, there's two dangers. One of the dangers is drifting away, and the other danger is shrinking back.

Let me show you that. If you come with me to Hebrews chapter 2 and verse 1, the apostle makes it really clear. He says this in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 1, Therefore you must pay, we must pay close attention to what we've heard lest we drift away from it.

And that seems to be a drifting, which is just careless or neglect. Maybe they weren't applying themselves to the truth of what God had said.

[2 : 51] And so in chapter 2 and verse 3, you get this question where it says, and this is written to the church, to Christians, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

And it was this drifting that caused neglect. You know what that is. When you go on holiday in the summer, and you go away for a week or two, and you leave your garden, when your garden, when you come back after a week or two away in the summertime, your garden isn't exactly like how you left it, is it?

Because it's been neglected. You didn't do anything with it, and yet it has grown. It is overgrown. Drifting. Drifting.

And neglect. The other danger is in chapter 10 and verse 32. Can you see that? He says to them, recall the former days when after you were enlightened, you endured, and here it is, a hard struggle with sufferings.

Sometimes you were publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

[4 : 05] Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which is a great reward. For you have need of endurance, perseverance, so that when you've done the will of God, you may receive what is promised for yet a little while.

And the coming one will come and will not delay, but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

So the appeal is keep on going. Now can you imagine at the end of chapter 10, these Hebrew Christians, they've been weakened by suffering. They've lived in pretty discouraging times, pretty desperate situations.

And they're saying, is this perseverance really possible? Can I really keep going? Is it really feasible for somebody who is ordinary and weak and frail like me, to go on believing and trusting in the Lord?

My circumstances are dark and difficult and troubling. Is it practical for me? And the writer says, well, it's certainly historical, and so chapter 11 is the story of people who lived by faith in God.

[5 : 18] Look what it says in chapter 8, by faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called out to go to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out not knowing where he was going.

He believed God. He took his only son, and he laid him on an altar by faith, and he offered him up. By faith, Moses, can you see him?

Verse 23, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents. And when he was grown up, verse 24, he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God, than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Israel of greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt. And we're given this catalogue of men and women, who in circumstances of appalling difficulty, believed God and kept going.

I haven't got time to go through the chapter. But it's a catalogue of one person after another, who kept on going. And that's what the apostle calls us to.

[6 : 28] He imagines life as a race. And he says, you're on the track in the Christian life, not for a sprint, not for 400 meters, but for the marathon.

And he says, persevere, keep going. There's nothing more urgent than this. And maybe our world finds this kind of perseverance strange. But we need to cry to God at the start of this year, that he would form in us, and make in our Christian character, such that we would persevere.

You find it all through the Bible. You find it in the teaching of Jesus. You find it in the teaching of John. You find it in the teaching of the apostle Paul. So Jesus said this, John 8, 31.

He said, if you continue in my word, then you are my disciples. Colossians 1, 22 and 23, the apostle speaks about presenting us before the throne of God, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.

The apostle John speaks of some who've left us. If they'd been with us, they would have continued with us. And so there's this constant plea in the New Testament.

[7 : 47] The apostle Paul in Acts 13, he persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 2 Timothy 3, verse 14, he says to his apprentice Timothy, continue in the things you've heard.

Now these two verses of Hebrews 12 are full of that. So let's look at them under four headings. First of all, the need for perseverance. The need for perseverance.

Why is it such a vital quality that God calls us to seek from him? It derives from the very nature of the Christian life.

And the word persevere gives us a clue. It's often set against the background of a military metaphor. So it's used to continue the fight, the battle, until the very end.

Not to desert the field. Not to run away. Because the enemy seems so great. Don't give up your post. But go on battling until victory. That's one picture.

[8 : 50] The military picture. The second picture is that of an athletic one. It's of a race of staying the course. Of not dropping out. Of not falling behind, but staying the course.

And the apostles are using that particular picture here. But you also find the military one in chapter 11, where the apostle speaks about the kind of perseverance. He says in chapter 11 and verses 33 to 34, he speaks for all these different people who through faith, chapter 11 verse 33, conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

That's the military context, isn't it? And so in both of these, Paul finds himself, or the apostle, the epistle finds himself talking of the Christian life as a race and as a battle.

He puts them together, doesn't he? So think about 2 Timothy, when he speaks about the end of the Christian life, what does he say? He says, I fought the good fight, I finished the race. And so what I'm trying to say to you is this, the Christian life, as it's painted in the New Testament, is painted as a race and a fight.

It is nowhere depicted as a holiday or a journey through this world that is free from danger and free from disaster.

[10:23] The Christian life is nowhere depicted as floating to heaven on kind of fluffy clouds and beds of ease. The Christian life is described as a war and as a race.

And a Christian has to give everything and to discipline herself and to prepare himself. And the Christian has to spend all her energies in this business because it's hard, isn't it?

It's hard to fight the good fight and run the race. The endurance of hardship and of trial. The pressures which the apostle speaks of a thousand different kinds.

Now, none of us would want to hide from any young Christian what it's like to be a Christian. None of us would want to hide the sheer, indescribable joy there is in serving God.

None of us would want to dial down the sheer, indescribable glory of what it means to belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. To know God as your Father. To have the Lord Jesus Christ as your elder brother.

[11:32] To have the Holy Spirit within you. We wouldn't want to downplay that. We wouldn't want to downplay the sheer, indescribable joy of knowing forgiveness of sins, your conscience cleansed, your past dealt with, your future secure.

of knowing that you are an inheritor of the riches of his grace. But we also don't want to hide the fact that the Christian life is a deadly conflict with the most bitter of enemies.

That we're engaged in a marathon. That we're not in a little sprint that takes a little bit of energy but we have to go on and on and on and on and on. And there are occasions aren't there when the Church of Jesus Christ most needs people who are just willing to keep on keeping on.

Think of Christopher Columbus. You know the guy who discovered America? He talks about his diary doesn't he? Where he's just sailing and sailing and sailing and sailing and sailing. Sailing on. That was his diary. Day after day after day. Sailing on, sailing on, sailing on. But there was a moment wasn't there where he caught sight of land. There was a moment when he discovered a whole new world.

[12:49] And for those in the Christian life who keep on and keep on and keep on and keep on and keep on there will be a day. There will be a day when you will discover a whole new world. To your joy you will discover the God who will bring you into a new world.

The truth is though until that time you will discover also an enemy who will use every means to harass you in the Christian life and to divert you from the great business of running the Christian life.

And so to some the apostle says doesn't he you ran well but what has hindered you? What has diverted you? WP Nicholson said if Satan cannot keep you from being converted he will do all he can to get you diverted.

Quite good isn't it? And the devil will divert you by all sorts of means. Taking your eye away from the finishing post. Getting you involved in a whole lot of things that will actually just slow you down and drag you back and blow you off course.

So there is this need for perseverance. But secondly there's the encouragement to perseverance. Can you see the beautiful balance in the verse? There's this really severe need isn't there for perseverance.

[14:12] and yet there's glorious encouragement. Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with perseverance endurance the race that is set before us.

So can you see the picture? The difficulty of perseverance the encouragement of the witnesses. The picture is think of one of those great amphitheatres think of a great stadium. rising ranks of people watching the runners. Tier advantage points. And those tiers are full of spectators who are bearing witness to something.

That's the important thing. They are bearing witness to someone. They bear witness. The real point of verse 1 therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses is not that the believers are in heaven this morning cheering us on.

That isn't the point. They're not sadly. And they're not standing around watching us admiring what we're doing. Isn't Paul Levy doing so well this week?

[15 : 26] That's not the main point. That's not the big point. But the big point Paul the apostle who we don't know who wrote Hebrews is that the big point is is we need to listen to what these witnesses are testifying.

What are these witnesses in Hebrews chapter 11 that he's just named? What are they saying to us in the crowd? Well think about it. How did they manage to go on? How did Abraham keep on course?

How did Moses go through all those trials and pressures that he experienced in leading those difficult people Israel out of Egypt?

Was it because they had some great personal qualities? Was it because Sarah had some wonderful characteristics? No it wasn't was it?

It was because of the faithfulness of God. We're told that he endured Moses he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

[16 : 31] And that is what all these great clouds of witnesses bear witness to. That is the great encouragement to persevere. And incidentally that is why we should be people who are interested in history.

It should be the history of Christ's church. The biblical use of history is not to point us to the past and say oh they were great days weren't they? They were great days in the 16th, 17th and 18th century.

That's not the biblical use of history. It's not wishing that you were living in the past oh that we were living in those days. No the biblical use of history is to say look what the living God did in those days and that God is the same God as today.

And so where is the Lord God of Elijah? The answer is he is precisely here with us. He is the same God.

God has not changed one iota. And there's not one thing that he did for those men and women in Hebrews chapter 11 that he's unable to do for you. And you might be thinking well not me not for me other people here maybe but not for me.

[17 : 44] but the living God who took that geriatric Sarah and gave her a child the living God who took Abraham who brought the name of his God into disgrace when he went down into the land of Egypt.

That God is able to take you and make you the kind of man or woman or boy or girl who will go on and on and on and on to the end.

Encouragement to persevere. And so think about how does God introduce himself in the Bible often. He says I am the God of Abraham and I am the God of Isaac and I am the God of Jacob and I am the God who brought your fathers out of Egypt.

He isn't simply giving them a history lesson is he? He is telling them this is my character. These are the qualities at the start of 2023 that you ought to put your confidence in.

This is the God you are to rest in and rest upon. Thirdly what about the preparation for perseverance? The preparation for perseverance there is a preparation so look at verse 1 therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

[19 : 14] In your vision it will say throw off everything that hinders. The writer of the Hebrews is urging us and urging the readers to be serious about the race and he is only addressing those who are serious to throw off everything that would be an impediment in running it.

And so one of the ways that people are hindered and prevented from persevering is just because they are weighed down with various kind of impediments. So can you see what the race is like?

It's not like the school parents race at the school sports day. You know what that race is like isn't it? And people get there they've done no warming up and yet they really go for it don't they and there's hamstrings pulled and all sorts of things and people joking and laughing.

It's not a fun run. The Christian race is not a fun run. It is what life is all about. And it's why we're here.

The question is how serious am I? Think of the professional sportsman get up in the morning and they weigh themselves.

[20 : 42] They fill in a sleep chart of how they slept. They watch what they eat for breakfast. They train until they can train no more. They manage their load.

They live don't they a really strange kind of life. And you say to them why on earth are you doing that? Why are you living like that? What's the point in doing that?

And they would say to us it all depends how seriously you take the sport. Lots of people in churches ask the question is there any harm in dot dot?

There's probably not any harm in that but it's not the right question. The question is this is how serious are we about the race? And in our culture we would say well you don't want to be too serious do you?

I don't know about you but I have found that the man or woman who is most serious about God is often the most gentle and the most humorous and the kindest of people.

[21 : 53] And I've tragically found that the person who is a Christian but is not really serious about God often is the most unhappy most discontented. And that's because they've got the worst of both worlds.

And so just look with me at chapter 12 verse 1 because it is a flabbergasting verse isn't it? Lay aside every weight. And let's go to the Olympic final 100 metres and you know they go along the thing and they I don't know who is runners now and they kind of interact one is dot dot dot and there you go the person waves at their crowd and they're from Dominican Republic you've got someone from Jamaica and then you come to somebody who's wearing a duffel coat and carrying two suitcases on the front on the start line of the 100 metres it would be ridiculous wouldn't it be so stupid a figure of stupidity is there anything stupid about an overcoat it's not is there there's nothing stupid about carrying suitcases that's really fine it's good to have a coat it's good to have suitcases but it's what he's professing to do makes it ridiculous and here's the point the apostle says the weights and the hindrances get rid of them and just notice can you see this

I'm not sure I've seen this before but in verse 1 there's a distinction between every weight and sin the weights are distinguished from sin there are things in your life and my life that are not sinful and yet they may be a weight that is stopping us from the Christian life and yet there are things which are harmful for all people all the time these things cling about us and the apostle Paul says to you think about your life this morning at the start of 2023 and disentangle yourself from the things that are hindering you and drop the sin that is stopping you running maybe a phone maybe an app maybe the

TV maybe money it may be possessions maybe a relationship that is stopping you from running all out maybe the trap of pornography and Paul speaks about cutting cutting away in Romans Paul speaks about putting things to death he speaks about being radical with certain things in our lives being radical with things that will stop us running the race and keeping on looking at the finished post don't drift preparation for perseverance let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily entangles and then finally let's just see the manner in which way to persevere look at verse 2 why is it worth it 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 right now at the right hand of the throne of God and so can you notice where our eyes are in the race our eyes are not primarily on the cloud of witnesses our eyes are on

Jesus and he is the author he is the founder and the finisher of our faith and of course Jesus is the great example of perseverance isn't he he is the prototype of perseverance look what he did he endured the cross he despised the shame and is seated at the right hand of God and so if you think of Jesus life they came to him again and again and again and the devil came to him again and again to divert him to try and distract him to try and entangle him and so when Peter says you are the Christ the son of the living God and then immediately Simon Peter says this way of suffering that you're talking about Jesus that isn't the way of the Messiah that isn't the way of the Lord and what does Jesus say to Peter Jesus says get behind me Satan because he saw behind Peter's diversion was the devil diverting his eyes from the glory of the father and as he hung on the cross you remember what they said to him they said come down from the cross if you are the Christ but he didn't listen because he persevered and he endured the cross but of course we don't look to Jesus primarily as our example we look to him primarily as our eternal sufficient saviour that he is the author and the finisher of the faith what that means is this this is a wonderful truth the only reason if you are running the

[27 : 15] Christian life this morning the only reason if you are in the race this morning is because he's put you there it's only by his grace and by his mercy that the Lord Jesus Christ has made you who were dead in your trespasses and sins and made you alive in Christ so that you can run and he's given you newness of life and he's put a new heart and a new spirit within you and a new desire for heaven and the glory of God and he's put you in that race and he is the author of that race he is the alpha the beginning of that race but notice it also says he is the finisher because he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ and that wonderfully means that if God has begun a work in you he will complete it and he will finish it and so the secret to running this race is not that I have this particular quality in my Christian character it is primarily that God will persevere with me he will persevere with me to the end and he calls you and I to persevere because he persevered with us to be the author and finisher of our faith and that is the ground on which we rest as we set our eyes on the

Lord Jesus and we are able to say at the start of this year Lord take me on let nothing divert me and so the great business of your life and my life this year is to go on with the Lord Jesus Christ and to keep going on and so we say to him today don't we let not the sins which cling around me help me Lord to put them to death give me a new heart give me a great hope that will delight in you that God will go on in his work with you what he has begun he will continue he is the author and the finisher so we know the hymn don't we a debtor to mercy alone the work which his goodness began the arm of his strength will complete his promise is yea

Amen! and never was forfeited yet and so that is the hope of the child of God this morning as we look to the future of this year and that is why when we say keep on keeping on we are assured that there is a new world that is coming and in that world this morning there is a forerunner who has entered into it before us you think of the image he has put an anchor down for our souls and it is as it were he is drawing you in and the Christian life is letting him draw you and let nothing in earth or in hell divert you from it and may God make us a people who will persevere to the end let's pray together