

Looking to Jesus

Hebrews 12:1-2

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Randy Lovelace

In the event that it wasn't apparent to you, it perhaps is apparent now, we decided to take these two verses and we are spending last week, this week, and even next week just on these two verses because it is a final turn in this sermon that was written down for us and that was passed around to the churches. It is a turn in this sermon as he looks toward how, then, do we walk by faith trusting in Christ if all that Christ has done is settled? And yes, and amen. How do we do it in the midst of trial and suffering? Particularly, his audience were those who were very acquainted with suffering and trial and persecution. And, in fact, as it was being read to them, as they would've become familiar with this sermon, they themselves were already in the midst of more persecution. Some had stopped being a part of the gathering of God's people. Some, who once professed the name of Christ, were now openly rejecting Christ and His Gospel. Others were concerned and worried.

And so, over and over again, he cautions them not to give in but to be aware of spiritual apathy, to be aware that we can forget the wonderful promises that are ours in Christ Jesus. And so, in various ways, he reminds them of this, and he comes off of chapter 11 as we looked at together, that great chapter of the hall of faith. And he says, this group of faith forbearers were those who are now a great cloud of witnesses.

And here in chapter 12:1-2 last week what we did was we looked together at what it means to lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. Weight can be anything which is good. It's not bad things, it can be good things that become ultimate things but, nonetheless, distract us from running to Christ by faith. Likewise, sin that so easily distracts and is so close to us, sinful patterns – not focusing on any one particular pattern or any usual suspects of sinful patterns – but any sin which so easily causes us to be tempted to stumble and to grow distant from the Lord.

These things we are to lay aside, and last week what I opened up with was this idea, this image, of Julie Moss, perhaps the most dramatic finisher of any Ironman in Ironman history when during her first Ironman, she was within 200 yards of finishing. And if you've watched the video, if you've gone and Google searched Julie Moss 1982 Ironman, you will see it is, perhaps, very difficult to watch. But when in the last 50 yards, she finally realized that she could no longer walk. And the woman in second place who was at one time 20 minutes behind her is now passing her within the last 25 yards. And what we talked about is finishing the race, running with endurance. And here, the way it finished was this. She crawled on her hands and knees across the finish line to second place.

Here is the reality. The reality is the life of faith at times can feel like you're running in the absolute best shape you've ever been in. You're in the zone. You know you're going to finish. You feel it. Your breathing is good. You've got your heart rate in check. The lactic acid in your muscles is not completely there. You know you're going to finish. And you finish upright, and you achieve the goal. And other times, you are crawling on your bloody hands and knees across that finish line. The issue is not how you finish. The issue is, will you finish?

And the reason why we run to Christ by faith is because He is the one who has gone before us. And this week, what we have to look at is not whether we finish running upright, or we achieve the goal. This second part of these sets of verses is really telling us something completely different. That in reality, we finish only just barely. As Peter says in his letters, "It is hard for even the righteous to be saved." The truth is even in our best condition, we are just getting to the finish line.

So, we don't just run to Jesus, who is the goal. We look to Jesus because He has gone before us. This is what we take up this morning. And before I do, I want to quote for you one of my favorite hymns. It is called "Jesus Lives and So Shall I." Here is the first verse.

Jesus lives and so shall I. Death! Thy sting is gone forever! He who deigned for me to die, lives, the bands of death to sever. He shall raise me from the dust: Jesus is my Hope and Trust.

"Jesus is my Hope and Trust." Jesus is not just the one we run to. Jesus is the one we look to in our running. Are you stumbling this morning? Are you discouraged? Are you beat up? Do you recognize your sin patterns but feel weak in being able to fight against them? Do you feel like your life is perpetually in the shallows and you fail to go deeper in the roots of faith and trusting in Christ? Do you feel that the world and your schedule is arrayed against you, and that when you want to sit down, there's yet another interruption? And you make it to Sunday morning, and I bet for some of you this is the only time you do pray during the week. And for some of you this morning, it's the only time you ever read the Bible during the week, although you intend to do otherwise.

This week isn't about how you're running. This week is about someone else who has run for you. And He invites you to Himself. Look to Jesus. Hear now Hebrews 12:1-2.

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, 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 the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Pray with me

Now, Lord, we would ask as we've opened your Word and we've heard these verses read to us now for the second week in a row. I ask that your Holy Spirit would set this Word, these verses, into the crevices of our hearts and our minds that we would reflect on it, that we would rejoice in it, that we would put our hope in this Word, which is spoken to us, which is not just ink on paper. It is the living God speaking the living Word to a living people. Lord, we are thirsty. We are hungry. We are stumbling. And we are running. And we need you. We need you, O Lord. We look to you this morning. Help us, we pray, in your mercy. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

You will see I've given to you a very complicated outline, author, perfecter. It's because I can't perfect on just these two simple categories. But as we look at these words, I want you to be aware that the way in which the preacher is using author and perfecter, and there is yet another way that these words can be translated. But either translation you use, the emphasis on these words in this first part of verse 2 is on the humanity of Jesus. And here theologians often distinguish – because that's what we do – we distinguish between the active obedience of Christ and the passive obedience of Christ. What do we mean?

The active obedience of Christ is all that Jesus did in His life to the point of giving Himself over to the Cross. His passive obedience was what He took upon the Cross on our behalf. The reason those are important is because we need both. Jesus isn't just the one that we look to because in His passive obedience, what He allowed Himself to experience – what He gave Himself over to, which was the suffering and humiliating nature of the Cross – we also have the fact that Jesus is our Savior because He did and obeyed in every way necessary so that He might serve as the right and only sacrifice for a sinful and dying humanity.

But in these verses, the emphasis is on His active obedience and His passive obedience. So, let's look together as we look at His humanity as He gave Himself. We see here when the preacher says, "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith," first this whole call to looking. Again, he's using

this athletic metaphor as he's already been digging into the race that we look to the finish line. (That's my microphone, my apologies). He looks to the finish line. He's not just looking to the finish line. He's looking to the One who has completed the race on our behalf. It is a fixed gaze, an undistracted gaze, a determined gaze. And here, the word "author" can also be translated as the word "champion." And the word "perfecter" could also be translated as "accomplisher" or "finisher." Both carry with it the same meaning but looking together at the word "author" or "champion."

When it says in verse 2 "looking to Jesus, the founder," the author, the champion, what is meant there is he's drawing a contrast to those he's already talked about in the cloud of witnesses. Here, he's drawing the distinction. Here is what is different. That while they are a cloud of witnesses, while they are ones who have gone before us in obeying and trusting by faith in the Lord and His promises and they were rewarded for their faithfulness, we cannot place our faith in them because they were imperfect and sinners. Although, isn't it beautiful how they were remembered in the hall of faith. The Lord remembers them for their faithfulness and does not bring up their faithlessness as it most certainly appeared in their lives. Thanks be to God. He has separated their sin as far as the east is from the west.

But even in that, they are not ones that we can look to, though they are an encouragement, though they are a cloud of witnesses. They're not our champions because they never received the promises that were promised to them in their time of their living. They didn't see ultimate victory, yet they believed their victory was in the Lord. They never saw their own victory.

But Jesus is different. When he says that Jesus is the author or the champion or the founder, what he's pointing to is that Jesus endured obedience. Jesus in His humanity walked by faith in the promises of the Lord. We've talked about this before. He was not a super-human. He was a human like you and me. He had to actively choose whether to obey or to disobey. He was tempted in every way that you and I are tempted. He walked trusting in the Lord's promises. And in His humanity, He walked in obedience. He did so in the midst of suffering instead of responding in righteous revenge. He withstood suffering and trial. He willingly took on Himself in obedience through humiliation, which He knew was coming. He gave Himself over to and was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where He withstood temptation that is beyond our experience but certainly encompasses it but goes to the very end where He had to face the direct temptation and presence of Satan himself. He understood and experienced obedience in the midst of deprivation and hunger and thirst and abandonment, and yet, He was obedient.

Jesus is the author of the faith. He is the founder, meaning He is the only One upon whom our faith can find its foundation. Because here's what is even more beautiful about who Jesus is. He didn't wake up on a Monday morning and suddenly find trial and persecution facing Him. He didn't get in the car and go to the edge of the neighborhood and find that, you know, there were angry drivers everywhere and was somehow surprised. No, He woke up every morning knowing, inviting, welcoming what would come.

Our confession says as much in chapter 8 when it writes of Jesus. "The office of the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake." He undertook it willingly. "That He may discharge," He was made under the law and He did perfectly fulfill the law. He endured most grievous torments immediately in His soul and most painful sufferings in His body. He was crucified, and died, and was buried, and remained under the power of death yet saw no corruption. On the third day, He rose from the dead and with the same body in which He suffered with which He also ascended into Heaven and there is seated at the right hand of the Father, He makes intercession and shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the world. Jesus didn't accidentally become a Savior and Redeemer. He willingly undertook it and all that would come with it. Thanks be to God.

I'm lucky if I don't hit snooze twice in the morning. Jesus never hit snooze. He didn't deflect. He didn't blame others. He was asked over and over again questions that were simply trying to trap Him. He knew it, and yet He faithfully ministered in the midst of His suffering those who were hurting, those who were lost, those who were broken, those who were sick, those who were poor. So, even in His

deprivation, He wasn't just obedient. He was giving Himself away. This is why He isn't just a founder, He is the champion.

Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, our confession states, through the eternal Spirit once offered up to God has fully satisfied the justice of His Father and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven for all those whom the Father has given unto Him. Jesus, therefore, is the One that we look to because of His active obedience in the midst of feeling the weight of distractions, in the midst of understanding and knowing that sin clings so closely to us, in the midst of our brokenness. Whatever it might be, we can look to Jesus and we can say: but Jesus was obedient on my behalf. Thanks be to God. And because He was the champion, because He was the founder, because He's finished the race, He's done it for us. Which means in your most sinful moment, in your most broken moment, in your most despondent moment, we have a Savior to whom we can look, and we can say: Lord, Lord, in the name of Christ have mercy upon me, a sinner.

This is why He is our champion. But He isn't just our author and champion, He is also the perfecter and the finisher. Here it isn't just talking about Jesus's active obedience, it is talking about what He has accomplished as the perfecter in His passive obedience. Because if Jesus had not been completely obedient and perfect in all that He did in the midst of His suffering, He never would have been an appropriate sacrifice, and this would all be a waste. He would merely be a martyr. But Jesus, because of His perfection and because of His being our champion and author, He went and, therefore, as the perfecter and finisher, He becomes One who is our accomplisher. I know it's not a word we use, but He's an accomplisher.

Here's why. This word which is translated as "perfecter" or "finisher" or "accomplisher," this is the only place that this word appears, not just in the Bible, but it's a whole new word that the author was using in not only his education, but his desire to bring forth to the body that was the ones he was ministering to in order to demonstrate just who Jesus is.

So, what does he mean? It doesn't just mean that Jesus finished the race. It isn't just that Jesus was an exemplar – which, perhaps seeing Him as the champion, He is the ultimate runner – but Jesus isn't just an example for us to follow and to walk in. He is the unprecedented Lord and Savior. Why? Again, as one of our confessions says, the Heidelberg, it says,

What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins? I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature, which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in His grace, God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgement.

Do you hear that? The beautiful thing about the Heidelberg Catechism, which came out of the Lutheran Church and out of the Reformation, is the fact that it's incredibly personal whereas the Westminster was written in a different context. It feels a little more doctrinal. It's not that the Heidelberg isn't, it's just using it in the "I" voice. Let me repeat it again. "I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement," because He is the accomplisher. Because He is the finisher of what He has accomplished on the Cross. He "will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature, which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in His grace, God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgement." Thanks be to God. He isn't just an example. He is the unprecedented, unmatched One who says: your sins are forgiven.

Do you believe that? Or do you allow the temptation of the evil one who would want to heap guilt and shame upon you, and you believe that is the thing you have to overcome to get back to Jesus? That is a lie from the pit of Hell. Shame and guilt are held over you like a weapon, and we often believe it. But here is the irony of faith. You don't have to wrap your brain around the fact that your sins are forgiven to make it so. You don't have to fully understand it. All we have to utter, all we have to say in those moments: Father, in the name of Jesus, forgive me. And even if we have to repeat that over and over and

over again, that is all we are called to trust in. Because all Satan has are arrows that have a blunt point to them. It's not that when we feel guilt and shame and distance from the Lord, it's not that it doesn't hurt. It does hurt. The attack and trials are real. But they will not separate you from the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ. Because Jesus has finished the race, so have you. Death is not hung over you or me. Death is made merely a gardener out of which we will be raised on the last day and made perfect in the sight of our Heavenly Father and brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ. The grave will not hold us. Sin cannot separate us from the love of God the Father in Jesus Christ.

So, we are called to believe every Sunday morning the reason why we have a confession of sin in the middle of our service is to come back to Jesus again, who is the author and perfecter of our faith, whose active obedience and His death, and willingly giving Himself over to the wrath and judgement that was due to us, Jesus has paid the price. Therefore, we can say that we have been delivered from our misery by God's grace alone through Christ, and not because we have earned it.

Why, then, must we still do good? To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by His blood. But we do good because Christ by His Spirit is also renewing us to be like Himself so that in all of our living, we may show that we are thankful to God for all He has done for us so that He may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits and so that by our godly living, our neighbors may be won to Christ.

So, how do we put these two things together, running to Jesus and looking to Jesus? We never hold them exclusively. We always hold them together, which means we get up and we continue to run. When we fall, when we sin, when we feel the brokenness of our sinful natures in us and around us, we look to Jesus again and we say: Lord, have mercy on me a sinner. But by the same power, the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is also at work in you who call Jesus by faith. All who call on Jesus by faith are given the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. And that same Spirit is the one we must call upon that we might be able to appropriate the grace that is ours. Not just the label of righteous but attain and call on the power of God in Jesus Christ and say: by your Spirit, help me to walk in new obedience today, to say no to gossip, to say no to judgement and hatred, to say no to lust, to say no to trusting in ourselves, to say no to the apathy that can grip us when we're surrounded by such wealth and accomplishment. And it is only by that power that raised Jesus from the dead that we can look to Jesus and run to Him and say: I want to obey.

Let me say to you, Christian, if you find yourself in a sinful pattern – whatever it might be – and you are believing the lie that it has the best of you, let me call you out of that lie and say, today new obedience can be yours. But only by the power of the Spirit and the Word together, working with the grace that is yours in Jesus Christ, and you can say no to sin. It is not your master any longer. It is still present, it is not your master. We still feel it, but it does not own us. Christ, who is the founder, the perfecter, the author, the finisher, has taken sin and death and beat it.

The question is not whether Jesus has done this. The question is, what are we looking to? What are we running to? What captures our imagination? He is the unprecedented One. And I call you this morning as your pastor and your friend, your co-laborer, a runner with you, and I call you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ today can be a day of renewal. Today. And the Holy Spirit can give you victory even if it is today and you get up tomorrow morning and you fall, you can receive the victory that is yours again. It's not how we finish. It's the One in whom we trust who has finished. Believe in Him. Run to Him. Look to Him. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of our souls, you are the author and perfecter of our faith. Lord, we confess to you that we forget it. And we try to heal our own wounds. We try to motivate ourselves instead of looking to you and running to you. But we are reminded of this Word by your Holy Spirit that it is only Jesus that we can depend upon. We thank you, our Father, for Jesus Christ who has gone before us and run the race and has been obedient on our behalf, but who is also the One who accomplished for us a righteousness which we could never attain to ourselves. Lord, we ask that you, by your Holy Spirit, would

give encouragement and strength to our souls to say no to sin and yes to righteousness, to walk in humility and repentance knowing that we cannot depend on ourselves but in Jesus Christ alone. Lord, I pray for those this morning who have believed the lies of the evil one and believed that they cannot be renewed or forgiven. Lord, I pray you remove that lie and may the power of Christ fall upon them and may they know rejoicing and mercy and grace. Lord, I ask that you would enable us by the name of Christ to escape apathy and to throw aside every weight and sin. I thank you that this Word is not merely to be rhetorical. It is a Word that is accompanied by the power of your Spirit, and you mean to work this out in us. Will you do this, please, and make us the people of God with deep roots of faith looking not to ourselves and never commending ourselves, but looking only to Jesus? In whose name we pray. Amen.