

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

HEBREWS 12:1-2**THE NEW YEAR -- RUN THE RACE AND FINISH !**

Therefore we also—since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Welcome 2022! Ready. Set. Go! Each year is like a race. Perhaps you're running much the same course as you ran last year. Ranchers/farmers—calving, planting, pasturing, spraying, haying and haying some more, harvesting, selling. Perhaps you work for a shop or a business—work, customers, orders, busy times, slack times. Weeks come and weeks go.. Or, perhaps your course is different this year. Graduating? Moving? Marrying? New Job? Retiring? A child? Whether similar to last year's course or not, what is your goal for the year? More money? To get a lot of "style points"? To advance yourself? Those things may not happen. What is your goal for the year? To finish! To get through it. To get to the end, so you can run again next year, that's the goal.

Our text for today is talking about running the race of life, focusing on finishing—"finishing" in the only true sense of the word—finishing in Christ. The writer of this epistle (letter) may have been Paul; we aren't sure. He is writing to Hebrew Christians, Jewish people who trusted that Jesus was their promised Messiah and Savior crucified and risen. They stood apart from the rejecters of Jesus, the haters and persecutors. To encourage these Hebrew believers, the writer has spent much of the letter pointing out how Jesus was in fact the One to whom all the Old Testament pointed. He was the Fulfiller of every spiritual message given to the Old Testament sinners, to the Old Testament believers. regarding atonement—making peace with God for sin. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection completed and far surpassed the Old Testament worship rites, all of which pointed to atonement in His blood. The Old Testament sacrifices, priests, and worship furnishings involved much pageantry, ritual, and national pride, but in Christ they were spiritually useless and defunct.

The Jewish die-hards were trying to win these Christ-believers back to the old worship. However, the letter urges believers to cling fast to Christ in faith. The writer lists many Old Testament "heroes of faith," who in simple trust waited and looked for the Fulfiller of all God's promises, the One bringing forgiveness and eternal life. These Old Testament heroes of faith waited patiently and even suffered for not joining with the scoffers against God's great promises: Some of the examples listed: Abel whose devotion to the Lord got him killed by his brother Cain, Noah who undertook building a huge ark when the project seemed utterly ridiculous, Abraham and Sarah who were beyond the age to have a child yet God promised them that through their son the Savior would come, Abraham when directed by God to offer up his son Isaac, Joseph despised by his ten older brothers, Moses and the people of Israel in Egypt disdained and enslaved by haughty Pharaoh, the people of Israel facing the impossible walls of Jericho, Samson the one-man wrecking crew against the Philistines, David against Goliath.

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better—for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us (Hebrews 11:36-40).

What a staunch band of people of faith, who did not give up, but trusted and loved the Lord who loved them first. God's plan for them and God's plan for us is that in Christ we all receive the glory and the victory of the race together!

Thus our text says: *Therefore we also—since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* The writer says, dear friends, you have a race to run against the rejecters who want to pull you away from Christ. You have a race to run against Satan himself. Look back at this long list of faithful people. Their life of faith is an encouragement for you. Do you need proof that in Christ you win—in Christ who brought God's promised forgiveness which you need so badly? Why, here's a whole cloud of witnesses recorded in Holy Scripture telling you God's Promises and Promised One are for real in your Life. There are not just one or two witnesses and martyrs, but a whole cloud, a mass, a large "stock" of them!

Does 2022 loom as an impossible course? Perhaps in a few months, it will begin to feel that way. Look to Scripture and see how many before you, who faced much greater obstacles, were cared for and granted victory in Christ by the Lord. Read the Bible. Understand, these men and women were not just great moral examples, as if “Be like Abraham and God will save you.” They were men and women who, in childlike faith, granted by the Holy Spirit, trusted in the Lord and His Promise for forgiveness and salvation against all foes and obstacles of life. Not just physical foes—some suffered great physical loss—but spiritual foes working against their victory through the crucified and risen Jesus. In the year ahead, do not simply make your goal physical success. Your goal is to finish and to finish as a child of God through simple faith in Christ. In Him you are safe, and in Him you are a “success”!

Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us. In a race a runner parts with everything he doesn't need—a suitcase full of valuables, a wallet full of money, a fancy belt buckle, a cowboy hat. It's just extra baggage, extra weight. Nor does a runner need anything which ensnares, encumbers, or hinders his progress—stylish boots, a long flowing coat, baggy leggings. Such get in the way and hinder. Likewise your goal in the year 2022 for finishing, for “finishing” as a child of God in Christ, will not be realized by amassing more “stuff” or more wealth. “What is a man profited if he gain the whole world and yet lose his own soul?” Jesus said. Your goal is to live, grow, and finish as a child of God in Christ. Like the covered wagons of old, if the cargo was too much for the team to pull up the grades, the “piano” was left behind. --- Or, anything that ensnares you will hinder your real goal. Sin, sin, sin, will impede your progress. It will slow down your life with the Lord. The devil knows it, and he plays for keeps. He will try to entangle you in crooked money, in a life filled with sinful fun and carelessness, in the alluring quicksand of sexual immorality, which only pulls one deeper and deeper. He will stop at nothing.

Endurance will be needed to finish 2022 as a child of God in Christ. *Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* Endurance—willfully persisting and holding your ground. Saying NO to sin and to Satan. That's not just a nice little slogan; it is also Biblical. Eve should have said No to Satan, Adam should have said No as well, Jacob should have said No to his own flesh about lying to his father, David and Bathsheba should have said No, Judas should have said No when tempted with money. Endurance means “standing tough,” even though tired, pushing ahead, not giving up. Satan wants you to quit, to walk away from your Lord and Savior. It's tempting to quit when the going gets tough. But under the Lord's hand, tough-going teaches you to stop relying on self, and to trust in your Savior. In 2022, push ahead with endurance in Christ.

But how are you going to do that?? I mean, you know how weak you are. Answer: Like one running a race keep *looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.* Literally, “look away-from _____ to Jesus.” A runner looks away from the distractions along the track, and ignores the runners beside and behind, but keeps his eyes and his focus on the goal. Push ahead through 2022, thick or thin, many obstacles or few, with your heart and eyes focused on Jesus. He is the author and the finisher of faith. He has come and made your salvation a reality for you. Your own lack of righteousness is forgiven through His death and resurrection, His Spirit works in your heart leading you to trust Him, He shepherds you all your life long, at the right time He calls your soul to Himself in death, and He will come back at the End to raise up your body, and take body and soul to heaven. He leads you, He's your victory. He's also behind you, He has your back. Look to Him. Go forward this year with your eyes on Him. In Him and through Him, you will endure. He is the author and finisher of your faith.

Do you know how much He loves you and how badly He wants you in the realms of heaven forever? *Who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame.* Like a parent who feels only love and “joy” to rush into a dangerous situation to rescue their child, so Jesus, for the joy that your rescue brought to Him because He loves you, endured the cross. He took the pain and the shame. To die on a “pole,” to die suspended on a “tree” was a shameful way to die. Jesus did not worry about the shame involved. Was He numbered with the transgressors? So be it. Did He look like a bad man? So be it. He despised its disgrace and endured the cross. He stood His ground. Like the star football running back from sixty years ago who was getting hit often, and toward the end of the game got hit hard, got up and scorned his tackler, “Is that your best shot?” Like the boxer who repeatedly gets knocked down but gets back up, Jesus scorned the cross, its pain, and its death, for you. He got back up. On the third day, He rose unfazed!

He has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Jesus, who was sent by the Father, has paved the way for you, has opened the doors of heaven with full righteousness—for you! He sits at the right hand of the Father in full authority with the Father. In Him you will finish the race, you will finish in heaven, you will finish 2022 as a victor—no matter how things unravel physically. Don't be weighed down with the cares of life, or entangled in sin, or give up and quit to join Satan's side. In Jesus, you will finish your course victorious! It's 2022. Ready, set, go! Finished in Christ!