**GOOD FRIDAY SERMON**

**2017**

**LOOKING TO JESUS**

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

**INTRODUCTION**

Some of you may have heard the story of Canadian evangelist Charles Templeton. Born in 1915 in Toronto, Templeton made a profession of faith in Christ in 1936 and quickly became an itinerant evangelist as well as a pastor of a rapidly growing church. His skills as an evangelist became so well-known that he began accompanying Billy Graham on many of his crusades through Western Europe. Together, the two of them were instrumental in leading Youth for Christ, an international Christian ministry aimed at discipling young people.

But as Templeton preached the gospel, pastored his church, and led thousands of people to faith in Christ, he began to struggle with doubts: doubts about the inerrancy of the Scriptures, doubts about who Jesus claimed to be, doubts about the doctrine of hell. He even doubted the very gospel he was telling others to believe. This struggle with doubt continued for 21 years, until he publicly announced that he had become an agnostic. Charles Templeton the evangelist had become Charles Templeton the skeptic.

This story resonates with us, doesn’t it? All of us likely have people in our lives who once professed faith in Christ who sadly do so no longer. That may even describe some of you who are here today. It is hard to be a Christian. It has been hard for me at times. And as our world becomes increasingly secular, and the hostility towards Christianity becomes increasingly pronounced, it’s not difficult to imagine how much harder it will be for the next generation.

What’s the solution? Where do we look for answers to the question of how we are to endure in our faith, and how we are to help others endure in their faith? We could do several things. We could research the best educational strategies for our children. We could invite the most brilliant, articulate Christian apologists to come speak to us. These things are important. But neither of them are most important.

The most important thing we can do in our fight to endure is look to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith, who alone has the power to sustain us to the very end. If we are to endure in our faith, we do not just need more arguments defending the faith. We need more of Jesus himself.

Our text for today’s sermon is Hebrews 12:1-2. Today, on this Good Friday morning, it is Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion, and death that calls us together. Our text will help us do that. And as we will see, it is Jesus’ suffering, crucifixion, and death that will give us all we need to endure in our faith.

**Read Hebrews 12:1-2**

The title of this message is **Looking to Jesus**, a phrase borrowed from the beginning of verse 2. Today, I want to show you that **Jesus’ Endurance on the Cross is the Key to Our Endurance in Faith.**

There are three ways our text tells us to look to Jesus, and they will be the three points of this sermon:

1. Look to Jesus as Your Example
2. Look to Jesus as Your Sustainer
3. Look to Jesus as Your Prize

 (1) **LOOK TO JESUS AS YOUR EXAMPLE**

Our text today begins in verse 1 with a majestic scene of a “great cloud of witnesses” watching a race. Two years ago I had the privilege of going to a Blue Jays’ playoff game with my dad. For those who don’t follow baseball, this was the first time the Blue Jays had been to the playoffs since they won the World Series in 1993, a long span of 22 years. Now, they had finally returned, and the entire country was buzzing with excitement.

I will never forget the sound of 50,000 people packed inside the Rogers Center, yelling and clapping as loud as they could, to cheer on their beloved team. It didn’t matter that RA Dickey was pitching. The stadium was so loud that you couldn’t speak to the person next to you.

That’s the scene we find in verse 1, except instead of a baseball game we have a race, instead of spectators we have “so great a cloud of witnesses”, and instead of the Blue Jays we have *us*. *We* are running the race, and an innumerable company of witnesses are watching us.

The race we are running, of course, is the race of faith. This race is for those who believe that Jesus Christ died for their sins, rose from the dead to raise them from spiritual death to spiritual life, and now reigns in heaven as their King, directing them and leading them in how they are to live their lives through the Holy Spirit and through the Holy Scriptures.

This faith, and this faith alone, is what this race is all about. You start running the race when you have this faith, you stay in the race by enduring in this faith, and you finish the race by never giving up on this faith.

But who is this great cloud of witnesses that we read about in verse 1, and what are they doing? This is where we need to turn to the previous chapter. Hebrews 11 is known as “The Hall of Faith”. It is, in a sense, the “Hall of Fame” of people in the Bible who exemplified what it meant to live by faith. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Moses, Rahab – these are just some of the faith-filled men and women the author of the Hebrews mentions in Chapter 11 who walked by faith, trusting in God and in his promises. But the emphasis is not just on their faith. It is also on their suffering.

Abel was murdered by his brother. Abraham was a sojourner in a foreign land. Sarah lived a lifetime without the joy of motherhood. Countless others experienced countless other forms of suffering, described graphically in verses 35-37:

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

These are the ones who make up this great cloud of witnesses. They are the saints of old who have already run the race of faith and finished it. And now, their lives and their deaths bear witness both to the suffering we must endure in the race of faith, and to the faithfulness of God to help us overcome that suffering.

They may be watching us run the race, but that’s not the main point in verse 1. The main point is that we are watching them. We are not surrounded by a great cloud of fans, or a great cloud of spectators. We are surrounded by a great cloud of *witnesses*. Witnesses don’t just watch. Witnesses bring testimonies of what they have seen, heard, and done. They bear witness to others. And the witness they bear to us is that, though the race is incomparably hard, we can finish it with God’s help.

But as we watch this great collection of saints, our eyes turn somewhere else, and they become fixed on someone else. We still see the great cloud of witnesses, but only in our peripheral vision. Verse 2 tells us that our eyes are fixed on one witness, and one witness alone: Jesus Christ. We run this race “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.”

Jesus Christ is the greater witness who brings a more powerful testimony of the life of suffering that all who follow him must endure. The sufferings and trials of the saints of old were great, no doubt, but they do not even begin to compare with the suffering of our Lord himself.

Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends. He was mocked and jeered by his accusers. He was beaten and flayed with a whip barbed with blades. His head was pierced by a crown of thorns. His hands and feet were pierced with iron nails that drove through his body and into a wooden board. His body was left suspended on a cross, held up only by the nails that painfully tore through his hands and feet. And worst of all, he was abandoned by God his Father, the One with whom he had shared an eternal bond of fellowship. Before the world existed, before time itself, the Father and the Son had been together in a perfect, loving relationship. There was never a time when they were apart. But now, for the first time, in his most desperate hour, the Son was left on his own. And there, on the cross, Jesus Christ would die the most painful death ever concocted from the twisted minds of fallen mankind, an innocent lamb led to the slaughter by the very ones he had come to save.

This is what we have come together to remember on this Good Friday. Jesus Christ, the only perfect man who ever lived, suffered and died so that sinners like you and me could be saved. Many see the cross as the ultimate display of injustice, an innocent man suffering for crimes he didn’t commit. As the pioneering British legal scholar William Blackstone wrote in the 18th century, “It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer.”

But those who know the Scriptures know that, though Jesus was innocent, he became guilty by taking on our guilt. And when he took on our guilt, he also took on our punishment. God poured out the punishment that we deserve on his very own Son in order to save us from his wrath. The cross wasn’t the ultimate display of injustice. It was in fact the ultimate display of justice, not against Jesus, but against us. And now, because of God’s act of justice on the cross, God offers salvation from his justice as a free gift to anyone who would turn from their sins in repentance and turn towards him in faith, trusting that through Christ’s death on the cross, all their sins are forgiven.

God extends this offer to you today. Whether you’ve walked with God through Christ for years, or you’ve never sought him before, he is calling you to have your sins forgiven, that you may enter into his loving embrace. It doesn’t matter if you feel too broken or unworthy. Only those who know they are broken and unworthy can come to him. Don’t listen to the lie that you are too sinful to be loved by God. That’s a lie straight from the depths of hell. The Bible actually says that it is our sin that displays the greatness of God’s love:

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The love of God is for sinners like you and me who have nowhere else to look for help than him.

But I must warn you: the journey ahead isn’t easy. The race of faith runs along the path of suffering. That is the road that Jesus took, and that is the road we must take as well if we are to follow him. His betrayal testifies that we may be betrayed and abandoned. His ears testify that we may be mocked and jeered. His pierced hands and feet testify that we may be physically persecuted. All of us will suffer for our faith, some different from others, some the same. But all of us will suffer. And when we do, what will we do? We must look to Jesus as our example. If Jesus our master suffered, then we who follow him must also suffer. As Jesus himself said in John 15:18-20:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”

(2) **LOOK TO JESUS AS YOUR SUSTAINER**

Now, if Jesus were only our example, then we would all be in big trouble. None of us can run the race of faith like Jesus did, because none of us have the strength to suffer like he did. But the good news is that we do not just look to Jesus as our example. We also look to him as our sustainer. This leads to our second point.

Verse 2 says that we must look to Jesus, for he is “the founder and perfecter of our faith”. Jesus founds our faith, and Jesus perfects our faith. In other words, our faith in Christ starts and ends with Christ’s saving work in our lives.

We start the race by putting our faith in Christ, but Jesus is the one who places us at the starting line. We run the race by continuing to trust in Christ, but Jesus is the one gives strength to our weary legs. And we finish the race by holding on to our trust in Christ, but Jesus is the one who helps us cross the finish line.

And the reason why he will perfect our faith is that we who trust in him now belong to him. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross for our sins, he didn’t just leave us on our own to work out how to endure in this world. He did much more than that. He made us his own, and now we belong to him.

Acts 20:28 says that the church of Christ was “obtained with his own blood”. He bought us with his blood, and now we no longer belong to ourselves. We belong to him. And because we belong to him, he has sealed us with his Holy Spirit, the guarantee of our inheritance, so that we need not fear that we will fail to finish the race.

Good Friday is meant to remind us that, if we run the race of faith, we can know with full assurance that we will finish the race, because Jesus has bought us with his own blood. We belong to him. And so, if he started our faith, he will also perfect our faith, for he takes care of his own.

At this point you may be thinking, “What about the Charles Templetons of the world? He started running the race, but he didn’t finish it.” We all know people who have left Christianity behind. What about them? How can the Bible say that Jesus finishes what he starts when it seems like everywhere we look, Jesus left people lying in the dust, unable to finish the race?

The answer to this question is sobering but simple: not all who say they profess faith in Christ have truly trusted in him for salvation. They may look like they’re running the race of faith, but they’re not. They’re running a different race. That race may look a lot like the race of faith, but it’s not. It’s a race that leads not to eternal life, but to eternal death.

There are many counterfeit gospels out there that lead to counterfeit faith. Some profess faith in Christ because they think it will lead to a life of prosperity without suffering. Others do it because they see an opportunity to receive the applause and recognition of others. Still others do it because they genuinely fear hell and want to be saved from it, but aren’t willing to change their lives in order to follow Christ.

But the distinguishing mark of someone who has true faith, and not counterfeit faith, is found in verse 1. They “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely”. The race of faith matters so much to them that they are willing to do whatever it takes to finish it. They know that Christ will sustain them throughout the race, but they also know that they need to run it.

Running the race is hard. It takes real sacrifices. According to verse 1, if we are to run the race with endurance, we need to do two things: lay aside every weight, and strip off sin. In ancient times, runners used to strip down naked when running a race to make sure that they could run as well as possible. The race mattered so much to them that they would get rid of anything that hindered them from finishing it.

What is a race, compared to eternal life? A race is nothing compared to knowing God both now and forever. If people in a human race are willing to do whatever it takes, shouldn’t we as well? We need to strip off sin, because we know that sin deadens our walk with God. It slows us down. It makes us stumble. It causes us to lose our motivation to pursue the Lord. We need to get rid of sin if we are to run the race with endurance.

But the striking thing about verse 1 is that it calls us not just to get rid of sin. It calls us to “lay aside every weight, *and* sin which clings so closely.” It’s not always the bad things that cause us to stumble. Often it’s the good things that become bad because they make us stumble. Watching TV is not sinful in itself. But when we’re watching TV every night in the only free time we have instead of doing the things that will help us run well, then we ought to lay it aside. That’s how much the race matters.

Running the race takes hard work. It requires stripping off the sin that we’ve come to believe will make us happy. It requires laying aside every weight that hinders us from running. These tasks may sound simple enough, but they’re impossible for us to accomplish by ourselves. That’s why we need to look to Jesus to be our sustainer. We need Jesus to perfect what he started in us.

When you’re tired of running this race of faith, look to Jesus as your sustainer. Whether you’re tired because of sin, or tired because the baggage of life has weighed you down, or tired simply because it’s been a hard road, the remedy is the same: look to Jesus as your sustainer. Jesus, and Jesus alone, can give you the motivation and the power to strip off sin and lay aside every weight so that you will have the energy to keep running this race of faith with endurance. Good Friday assures us that Jesus will sustain all who look to him in trust, for those who look to him belong to him.

(3) **LOOK TO JESUS AS YOUR PRIZE**

One question remains: what is it that makes this race worth running? Our text shows us that the race of faith runs along the path of suffering, and that running the race requires us to get rid of things that we may hold dear. If the race is so hard, what motivates us to keep running it? The answer is simple: we run for the same reason any runner runs. We run to get the prize. This leads to our third point.

Verse 2 says that Jesus endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him.” Jesus ran for a prize, a prize so great, so joy-producing, that it gave him strength to endure the cross. He endured the mocking, the beating, the scourging, the nails, the crown of thorns, the agony of the cross, and worst of all, the abandonment by his Father, because of the joy that was set before him.

And what was this joy? We find the answer at the end of verse 2. He endured the cross for the joy of finally being “seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Why do we sit down? We sit down when our work is finished! We sit down when we have accomplished what we were sent to do! Jesus endured the cross for the joy of completing his Father’s work of saving us from our sin. Jesus longed to hear his Father say, “Well done, my son. You have done all I sent you to do. With you, I am well pleased.” And Jesus longed for the day when the fruit of his works – all the men and women who were bought by his blood – would join him before the Father in everlasting, never-ending relationship.

That was the joy that sustained Jesus. But what about us? What is the prize for which we strive, the joy that enables us to endure? Typically, the goal of a race is to beat other racers. You want to run faster than the other runners. You want to cross the finish line before them. You want to finish first, so that you can stand on the podium and receive the first place prize. You run for glory, and you run for reward.

Notice that our text says nothing about the kinds of prizes you would expect in a race. There’s no material reward promised, no personal glory. The text doesn’t even say that the goal of the race is to beat other runners. The only indication in our text of the prize to be won is the phrase we’ve now become very familiar with in verse 2: “looking to Jesus”.

Jesus is our prize. His longing to be with us gave him endurance to bear his cross. And our longing to be with him gives us endurance to bear our cross. Having Jesus forever is the great joy that gives us strength to finish the race of faith.

It’s so easy to think of Jesus simply as a means to an end. Often we want Jesus because he gives us eternal life. Or we want Jesus because he gives us forgiveness of sins. But Jesus isn’t a means to an end. Those things are the means to the end of knowing Jesus. All the benefits of the gospel benefit us precisely because they give us Jesus. Indeed, this is how Jesus defines eternal life in John 17:

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Eternal life is precious to us not because of its duration, but because of its quality. I don’t think anyone would want to live forever in a joyless existence, where everything is grey and bland and boring. We want eternal life because we want eternal joy! And we find eternal joy from the One we will spend eternity with.

Jesus is the great prize for which we run the race of faith. He is all we want, and he is all we need. As the apostle Paul wrote shortly before he was executed for his faith:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:6-8)

Paul didn’t want a literal crown. The crown he eagerly looked forward to was the gift of having Jesus himself. He says the crown is for “all who have loved his appearing.” What could we possibly want more than what we love? What we want most is what we love most. For those who love Jesus’ appearing, what they want most in life is Jesus himself. Their ultimate satisfaction is not having a crown, but having Jesus. Jesus is our great prize. Jesus is our crown. And the joy of knowing that we will spend eternity with him is enough to make us endure this race.

**CONCLUSION**

Charles Templeton never came back to the Lord. He died as an agnostic. But when he was in his 80s, author and journalist Lee Strobel interviewed him for his book, *The Case for Faith*. Near the end of the interview, Strobel asked him about how, as an agnostic, he now viewed Jesus. This is how Strobel narrates Templeton’s reply:

“ ‘In my view,’ he declared, ‘he is the most important human being who has ever existed.’

That’s when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. ‘And if I may put it this way,’ he said as his voice began to crack, ‘I…miss…him!’

With that tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept.

Templeton fought to compose himself…After a few more awkward moments, he waved his hand dismissively. Finally, quietly but adamantly, he insisted: ‘Enough of that.’”

Today, in this Good Friday service in 2017, you may have been moved to affection for Jesus. You may admire him as the most important human being who has ever existed. You may even look back with nostalgia at a time when you walked with him. But when the service is over, how easy it is to wipe away a few tears and say “Enough of that. Time to move on with life.”

Let us not respond to Jesus like that, looking to Jesus like an old friend we haven’t kept in touch with. Let us look to Jesus in humble faith and surrender, believing that he is who he said he was, and submitting ourselves under his lordship. For Jesus was and is God himself, the Suffering Saviour who gave everything up for us, that we might give everything up for him.