

Looking unto Jesus

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Will you turn with me now to Hebrews 12, and I shall read in your hearing the opening two verses, which to many of us are very familiar words:

"Therefore let us also, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, and the sin which does so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Now let us pray and ask God by the Holy Spirit to give us a fresh sight of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Father, we thank you for the words of our Lord Jesus, who speaking concerning the person and ministry of the Spirit said, "He shall take of Mine, and He shall reveal it to you." And we pray that the Holy Spirit this night will do that work which He delights to do in testifying to Christ. Take, we pray, His own inscripturated Word and make it a living Word to each of our hearts. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

For our brief communion meditation tonight, I want to direct your attention to one simple, fundamental, but all-important word found in the two verses read in your hearing. And that is the word embodied in the phrase in verse 2 at its beginning, "looking unto Jesus". Those words are the kind of words that naturally lend themselves to plaques that are found in Christian bookstores and in various forms of calligraphy or other forms of visual art because there is a bit of catchy ring to them: "Looking unto Jesus". But so often the words are used in a relatively sentimental way, in a way that has very little intelligible content. And yet the way in which they are set before us surely is just the opposite of that.

Let me say just a word about the general setting of these verses from which that phrase is taken. Those of you familiar with the epistle to the Hebrews will know that in this epistle the writer is calling his readers to persevering faith based upon the better things of the new covenant. Here were people tempted to go back to the types and shadows of the old covenant because their confession of attachment to Christ as the mediator of the new covenant and to all of the privileges of that better covenant with its better priesthood, better sacrifices, and all of its better things was bringing upon them bitter and sometimes even life-threatening opposition and persecution. And so the writer to Hebrews is concerned by drawing on the believers, by holding out before them the better things and, as it were, getting behind them and driving them on with some of the most sober threatenings and warnings to be found anywhere in the Word of God. So he is enticing them to persevering faith by opening up the better things of the new covenant. And he is seeking to drive them on in the way of the better things of the new covenant by sober warnings. And in the course of doing that, he came to

chapter 11 in which he set forth this marvelous display, this honor role of men and women who manifested such persevering faith. And starting with the patriarchs and moving right on to some of their own contemporaries who were being martyred for the sake of Christ, he sets forth this display, this honor roll of the men and women who manifested this persevering faith and thereby attained the reward of the eternal inheritance.

In the light of all of this, he now is going to give this very focused exhortation of verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12: "Therefore let us also...." And he begins with this encouragement to enter and remain in the race. He says, "...seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, [let us do something because there is a great cloud of witnesses.]" And the witnesses could either be those who have gone before and are now in the stadium beholding us, or I rather believe that the meaning is, they are the ones who bear witness that persevering faith does indeed bring a glorious reward. The idea that the saints who've gone before us are actually beholding us in our race is something that, to my knowledge, cannot be established exegetically from the Word of God. I believe it would cause great sadness to the spirits of just men made perfect if they saw the way in which we often run the race. And I don't believe God's going to make them our encouragement at the expense of their joy in the presence of God. But they are witnesses by their presence in the very immediate presence of God that to run the race of persevering faith is not to be engaged in a fool's endeavor. So there is the encouragement to enter and remain in the race that comes from this cloud of witnesses to tell us that to run the race in persevering faith is indeed to attain unto a blessed reward.

Then there comes, in the second place, the call to make the necessary preparation to run well in the race. Compassed with these witnesses, we are to lay aside every weight, everything that would encumber us, and the sin which does so easily beset us. This is not referring to a besetting sin, but sin of any kind, sin of any nature, sin in its totality. We must lay aside all encumbrances. We must lay aside the very body of sin like a cloak that would encumber us. I had the privilege of watching the Millrose Games on Friday night. I was invited by one of our church members to see them in Madison Square Gardens. And it was interesting to watch, that before every race, no matter what kind of clothes the athletes had, they stripped down to the bare minimum of their racing gear that they might not be encumbered in seeking to win the prize. So we move from the encouragement to enter and remain in the race that comes from those who have gone before and witness that to do so is not to be a fool. Then there is the call to make the necessary preparations to run well in the race (lay aside all encumbrances and the body of sin).

Then thirdly, there is the summons to run the race with endurance determined to finish. "Let us run with patience [or endurance] the race that is set before us." And the language here is very similar to the language of 1 Corinthians 9. We have been dealing with the subject of Christian liberty and the necessity of having our liberty regulated by the determination to keep our own souls in a healthy state, by the determination not only to enter the Christian race and run for a while, but to complete the race and to seize the prize. And some of the technical language from those athletic games is found in this passage. And so we are summoned to run this race with endurance determined to complete it.

Then we come in the fourth place to our phrase, the directive for the fixation of our eyes throughout the entire race. Everything leads up to this. We have responded by

grace to enter the race. We have and continue to seek to lay aside all encumbrances and the sin which besets us. Our hearts are set upon running and completing the race. And in all of that, there is to be this directive understood by us that touches the fixation of the eyes of our souls throughout the entire race: "looking unto Jesus". Now the word "looking" is a rare word in the New Testament. This particular word is found only twice. There is a standard word for looking, but that's not the word that is used here. This word literally means to take your eyes away from one thing and to concentrate them upon another. It is a looking away off unto Jesus, so that in the entirety of the Christian race, there is to be a fixation of the spiritual eyes upon Jesus Himself. And because in the very nature of being true to the text in 1 Corinthians 10, we have had some very deep, long, searching, sobering looks at our own hearts. We have had some very deep, long, searching, sobering looks at the sins that lurk within our own hearts and are constantly there to threaten us in our Christian race. And in the midst of all of this, I believe this text is the most appropriate meditation for our coming to the table tonight. In our determination to regulate all of our liberties, by the determination to complete the race and seize the prize, we are to turn our eyes away from every other object, including ourselves, the sins into which we might possibly fall, the many who are strewn as wreckage along the race course, and we are to fix our eyes upon Jesus Himself.

But this looking off unto Jesus is not some mystical, sentimental notion. We are to look off unto Jesus basically in a two-fold light. Look at the text: "looking [away, off] unto Jesus the author [or captain] and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The two-fold light in which we are to gaze by faith upon our Lord Jesus with a faith that is constantly instructed and enlightened and shaped by the Scriptures, so that it is not a Jesus of our own imagination, our own fantasy. But it is the Jesus of Biblical revelation. We are to look off unto Him first of all as the originator and completer of faith. Now I'm not going to weary you with the possible meanings of the various words and the different opinions of the commentators. But this much is clear: with respect to our faith, whether we consider it as our faith, the subjective exercise of trust in Christ, or our faith, the body of truth revealed concerning Christ (for the term "the faith" or "faith" is used in both ways in the New Testament), one thing is clear, Jesus stands paramount at the beginning of it and the end of it. And He is everything significant in between. So to look off unto Jesus, if it is as captain, originator, and perfecter of our faith, then it is looking unto Jesus who began the work of saving grace in us and who will certainly complete that work. And whatever heaviness and leadiness us we feel in our legs in the midst of the race, whatever burning of lungs and oxygen starvation we may feel as we're coming into our last laps, Jesus puts no one into this race of faith but what He is both originator and perfecter of their faith. "Yea, I to the end shall endure as sure as the earnest is given, but not more secure the glorified spirits in heaven."

And if it is referring more to the objective truth about Christ of which He is both author, captain, and perfecter, then it is saying fix the gaze of your soul upon Jesus as the One in whom all the provisions of God in the Gospel find their expression. This has been the great theme of this epistle to the Hebrews. Do I need a priest to represent me before God by sacrifice? He is the priest greater than any Aaronic priest. He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Do I need a sympathetic priest who has been tempted in all points like as I have been tempted yet never stained with sin? Well, He is just such a priest. Do I need a sacrifice that having been once offered never needs to be repeated? He is the One who by one sacrifice has

perfected forever those that are sanctified. So whatever my need as a sinner is, in Christ and in the truth concerning Christ, there is a faith of which He is both the author and the perfecter. He is the beginning and the end. Hence, the Scripture says, "the truth as it is in Jesus". And Paul could say, though he ranged over the widest field of Christian doctrine, in Colossians 1, "whom we preach" with reference to the Lord Jesus. And so the direction for the fixation of our spiritual eyes throughout the entire race is to be a fixation upon Jesus.

It is to be a looking unto Jesus not as a lovely little spiritual catchword, but with spiritual intelligence contemplating the fact that I'm in the race because it was first of all His idea, not mine. Left to myself, I wouldn't be in this race. I would still be with those drifting down into perdition on my way to everlasting darkness and the wrath of God. He is the One who laid hold of me and brought me into the race. If the sense here is the captain, He's the One who conscripted me. And He waits at the finish line to reward me. Look away unto Jesus. He knew all the difficulties I would face. He knew all the impediments. He knew the times I would stumble. He knows the times when I would wonder, "Will I make another step in that race?" Looking off unto Jesus, the author, the originator and completer of faith.

But He is not only the One whom we're to fix our eyes as originator and completer of faith, but as the great pattern and example of faith. Look at the latter part of verse 2: "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame and has set down at the right hand on the throne of God." There is no clearer example of the pattern of persevering faith than is to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He lived the life of faith without a tinge of unbelief. And notice the pattern and example of His faith. It was one in which He fixed the end in His eye: "...who for the joy that was set before Him..." What was the joy that was set before Him? Well, according to this passage, we could say it was the joy of the personal reward for His own humiliation and suffering, namely being brought to the place of Messianic exaltation, described in this verse as being set down at the right hand of the throne of God. And that certainly is a Biblical truth. It seems to be alluded to here. It's the truth of Philippians 2:8-11:

"[Christ] emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross. Wherefore also God highly exalted Him, and gave unto Him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Or Acts 2, where Peter speaks of Christ's exaltation as Messianic Lord being the fruit of His willingness to be crucified at the hands of wicked men.

But I rather believe that the allusion here, "...who for the joy that was set before Him...", is the joy spoken of in Isaiah 53: "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied." The joy of spoken of in Hebrews 2, where it speaks of the captain of our salvation, the same word in the original translated there "captain" is translated here "author". "Make the captain of our salvation perfect through sufferings." And in that setting, we are called His brethren, a wonderful allusion to Psalm 22, where Messiah says, "In the midst of the brethren, I will sing praises unto Thee." So could it be that in our Lord being the pattern and example of faith, He fixes the end in His eye. And the end for Him, the joy set before Him, was presenting all whom He puts

into the race and sustains throughout the race and brings to the end of the race, and upon whom He confers the prize, the joy of presenting them totally conformed to His likeness in the presence of angels, and to present them unto the Father.

But whether that is the precise nuance of the passage, the thing that is clear is that the pattern and example of our Lord's faith is that future joy became the motivation and the strength to endure present difficulty. Look at the passage: "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame...." As a man of faith, the cross lay before Him. Shame--what a simplistic way to describe all He bore. And He didn't go through it stoically by some kind of internal floating upon the great weight and strength of His divine nature. His experience in Gethsemane shows, as the perfect God-man, the thought of His human soul being the receptacle of the unleashed fury of the wrath of God caused Him such an agony that it pressed, as it were, great drops of sweat mingled with blood from His brow and other parts of His body. Fill in some of the nuances of the account in Mark. It could well be some of His very garments had the appearance of being blood-soaked as a result of that agony. Everything in Him--there was an aversion: "O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me." What enabled Him to endure that cross, to embrace it, to march out of that garden and on to the high priest's place of judgment and on before Pilate and Herod and all that followed. "...who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, [thinking lightly of it's] shame...." Now that's relatively speaking. In itself, the account of our Lord's trauma and agony prior to and upon the cross was real: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me!" But relatively speaking, in the terms of the joy set before Him, and holding to His course, knowing that He would receive the full reward of His sufferings, He ran with endurance the race that was set before Him.

And on this communion evening, as we come to the table, with many of us having been duly and properly sobered in recent days regarding this matter of the race, and though we are free men and women in Jesus Christ, free from the curse of the law, free from the galling pressure of the law, with no internal delight in its standards or motivation to obedience, and though we are free from all the trappings and ceremonies of the Mosaic system, and free from men lording it over our consciences, we have seen that that freedom is not unto a liberty that tempts God and leaves us vulnerable to a dull conscience and to a shoddy life, but freedom to be the willing, joyful, meticulously obedient bondslaves of Jesus Christ.

Where will we derive both motivation and strength to run with endurance the race that it set before us? It will come as we look off and away unto Jesus. Look at yourself and you'll see weakness, accumulated, massive weakness. Look to others and you will see that which often will disappoint you. Look out into the world and you'll despair. But looking unto Jesus, what will you see? You will see Him who is originator and completer of faith; you will see Him as the pattern and example of faith, "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God." And it is He who says in the book of the Revelation, "To him that overcometh, I will give to sit down with Me in My throne as I overcame and sat down in My Father's throne."

Dear people, what better place to look off from ourselves, to look off from one another, to look off from all the dangers in a seductive and bewitching world, to look off from the prince of darkness, who with all of his power and machinations goes about, Peter says, as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and look off unto Jesus, not in some mystical, sentimental way, but with the faith content--He is

originator and perfecter of faith. In the objective faith, Christ is all and in all and everything I need to be a perfect Savior to take me all the way to glory. Look off unto Jesus as the One who has put me into the race, who by His grace has granted repentance and faith to me, and having begun that work will complete it. And then look to Him as the pattern and example of faith in which we seize the prize with our eyes, who for the joy set before us, the joy of knowing a few more breaths--to use the imagery of the race, a few more yards, a few more meters, a few more breaths, even with burning lungs and lead in legs, a few more strides, and we'll break the tape and seize the prize. Then it will be unmixed, undiluted joy forever and forever in His presence.

"Looking unto Jesus." We do not see Him now. The Scripture says, "...whom having not seen, ye love." And He has left behind us no human artist whom He inspired and to whom He revealed what His face looked like. We don't know whether He was five foot six, five foot eight, or six foot seven. We don't know whether He was of medium build or stocky. We don't know whether He had big bones or small bones. He left us no record, but what He did leave us is bread and the fruit of the vine. He said these are the only physical tokens of My having been amongst you that I warrant to be brought into My church to serve the interest of nurturing the devotion of My people. That's why there's no Sallman Head of Christ, no crucifix, no cross--none. But there is bread, and there is a cup. That bread signifies and symbolizes the body in which carried out the very thing our text talks about: enduring the cross, despising its shame. And the fruit of the vine in the cup signifies His violent death, His blood poured forth as a sacrifice for sin, all to ratify a covenant that would be sure and certain in all of its provisions for all of those for whom that covenant was made.

"Looking unto Jesus." Make God help us to look at Him afresh and keep the eyes of our souls fixed upon Him. And for such people, in a very real sense, the transition from this life into heaven will really not be such a shocking thing. For having looked upon Him by faith and been sustained by His grace through life, they will be raised to entirely new levels of the same blessed realities when faith shall be turned to sight, but it will not be a different Christ, but the same Christ. In that sense, it will not be a great shock if we've lived looking off unto Jesus, to wake up when we die looking upon the face of Jesus. May we so live, and may we so die.

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