

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 22, 2024

## **Making Progress**

Hebrews 12:1-13

Even though this year's church anniversary has come and gone, we're still rejoicing in God's faithfulness. In fact, the message on our church sign still points us back to last Sunday's celebration and forward into continued reliance on the promises of the Lord. Perhaps it's similar to keeping the happy birthday banner on display around the house for a while, even after the party itself has concluded. And now, by God's grace, we're several days into our 67th year of worship, work, and witness.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once pointed out, "The great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving. To reach the port of heaven, we must sometimes sail with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor." Progress toward the goal of God's kingdom, and the endurance required to get there. These are two of the essentials for followers of Jesus. Throughout the Scriptures, we see that for people of faith, staying in place, or maintaining the status quo, or perhaps even moving backwards, aren't options. What matters is progress toward the goal of Christ, and his reign. This is the hope of glory. It's not something we achieve or accomplish, or bring in by our own human effort. It's the promise of God and the gift of God, a gift that we grow into through faithfulness and perseverance.

Holmes spoke of progress in terms of sailing. That can certainly be a helpful image. But in today's Scripture passage from Hebrews, there aren't any boats and wind. Only a running track and lots of screaming fans. That's because the writer of Hebrews brings us into the arena as runners in a great race of faith. In chapter 11, the writer has told us about many others who have run this race successfully. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and on the list goes. These models of faith have already completed the marathon. Now it's our turn to run. But we're not on our own. All the previous runners have now taken their seats in the stands. Some of them are folks we saw in the photos last Sunday, brothers and sisters in Christ who were part of the very beginning of our congregation's life and mission. Their ongoing presence and support is living testimony that this race can be completed. Together with all the faithful in Christ, they're what the writer calls "a great cloud of witnesses" (v. 1), surrounding us and urging us on in our pursuit of the prize.

But it's not as if we've stepped onto the track completely rested, totally refreshed, and fully nourished, Gatorade in hand. No, the writer acknowledges that we're already tired. We've already been competing in what feels like an unending marathon of trust and obedience, trying not to give up on the outcome of our faith. And now we're being called upon to make it through the last leg of the competition.

In that regard, maybe we can resonate with the folks originally addressed in today's text. Preacher Thomas Long tries to capture the mood in this particular community of Christians. He says:

They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying

to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

Like them, we're urged to keep our eyes on the finish line. But between here and there, there are all sorts of things working against us. As I've indicated, there's fatigue, literally and figuratively. If you've been following Jesus for any significant length of time, you know that staying the course is demanding and costly. The way of the cross requires self-surrender and sacrifice. It requires emptying yourself for the sake of Christ and the cause of the gospel. Along the way, there are constant challenges, steady trials, and ongoing spiritual warfare. The battle with temptations continues. The struggle with sin goes on. Your spiritual muscles get tired.

There's an old tale that on the wall of a city telephone booth was plastered a sticker that read, "If you are tired of sin, read John 3:16." Below that someone had scribbled a handwritten message, "If you are *not* tired of sin, call 555-1176." In a strange sort of way, if you're a follower of Jesus, one of the signs that you're trying to be faithful is that you're tired of the struggle with sin. You feel caught in that tension between being holy and being unholy. You know that you've committed yourself to a path that requires leaving old ways behind. But in some respects, they're still with you. You haven't completely mastered the new ways that come with being a disciple. You want to make progress in the Christian life, but the lane that leads to being more like Jesus seems like an endless series of obstacles. It is, as the writer of Hebrews says, "your struggle against sin" (v. 4).

During a Monday night football game between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants, one of the announcers observed that Walter Payton, the Bears' running back, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing yardage. The other announcer remarked, "Yeah, and that's with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards!"<sup>2</sup> That's the way it can often feel in the struggle against sin. Overall, there's progress. You're covering some ground and moving forward, but not without plenty of things that want to stop your advance.

So what are we to do? Well, getting back to the race imagery, our text says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders" (v. 1). In other words, strip off the things that weigh us down. Get rid of the things that are a drag on our progress. Remove and toss aside the things that keep us from moving forward at a smoother and faster pace.

If you've ever followed the Olympics, you know that in many of the events, just tenths of a second, hundredths of a second, and in some cases even thousandths of a second, can mean the difference between winning the gold medal, the silver medal, and the bronze medal, or no medal at all. It's no wonder that extraordinary steps are taken to counter the forces that might slow a competitor down. During the 2014 Winter Olympics, the U.S. speedskating team asked Olympic officials for permission to abandon the Under Armour suits that they suspected were contributing to poorer results on the ice. Some skaters apparently felt that the vent on the back of the suit, designed to let heat escape, was letting in extra air and creating unwanted drag. Under Armour responded by saying that when it came to the new suits, the company would "move heaven and earth to make them better."<sup>3</sup> Eventually the team was granted permission to switch back to some older suits, but still failed to win any medals.

But you get my point. In this race of faith, we who have placed our trust and hope in Jesus need spiritual under armour, in whatever forms we can get it, to help reduce the drag and

improve our performance. "Throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." The choice of words here is interesting. This is the only time that the word translated as "entangles" appears in the entire Bible. It could also be translated as "the sin which so easily *clings*." Other possibilities include "surrounds" / "besets" / "distracts." Whichever option we go with, the basic message remains the same, namely, that we're urged to get rid of anything that encumbers our ability to run this race, anything that hinders our capacity to make progress in completing the course laid out before us.

This means that each of us has to look at our life and see the things that are hindering us from moving forward the way that we should in this race of faith and obedience. And for that to happen, you and I need God's help to discern what's weighing us down, what's tripping us up, what's creating a drag on our movement toward the objective of our lives, the kingdom of God.

Maybe it's a particular attitude or action that's hindering your progress. Maybe it's a particular pattern of behavior or a harmful, destructive habit. Maybe it's an experience from the past or a fear about the future. Maybe it's a refusal to repent or reform. Maybe it's anxieties, addictions, or ambitions. Maybe it's possessions, power, or the desire for popularity. Maybe it's self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, or self-satisfaction. Maybe it's a sense of guilt, shame, or failure. Maybe it's resistance to forgiving or being forgiven. Maybe it's apathy, complacency, or indifference.

Whatever is dragging you down and hindering you from making progress in faith and obedience needs to be removed and laid aside so that you can advance the way that God wants you to and intends you to. This doesn't mean that throwing off everything that hinders will come instantaneously and easily, but it does mean that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, change is possible, and you can move forward in God's purpose for your life.

In Australia, the coat of arms pictures two creatures—the emu, a flightless bird, and the kangaroo. These animals were chosen because they share a characteristic that appealed to the people of Australia. Both the emu and the kangaroo can only move forward, not back. The emu's three-toed foot causes it to fall if it tries to go backwards, and the kangaroo can't go in reverse because of its large tail.<sup>4</sup> Now though the emu and the kangaroo aren't competitors with us in this race that the writer of Hebrews describes, they can certainly help us remember that the way of Christ always involves moving forward. As our text says, this is a race "set before us" (v. 1). In other words, what matters most is what's in front of us, not what's behind us.

And as we run this race, one of the ways that God's grace is manifested to us is through plenty of fan support. Our Scripture says that you're surrounded by all the faithful in Christ, those who are still here with us and those who have already died in the Lord. Remember that the community of God's people in Christ shouts its support for you and urges you on as you press on in the way of Christ. So with the crowd behind you, lay aside whatever is hindering you from the course you're called to follow, look away from whatever would distract you, and concentrate on Jesus, who has already reached the goal of this race. By keeping his focus on the joy that was set before him, he endured the agony and shame of the cross, so that you too could be brought to glory. Even now, from his own place and position of sovereignty, he wants to give you the steadfastness, endurance, and faith that you need to put aside the encumbrance of sin, to overcome the obstacles that oppose you, and to complete the race set before you.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 176.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Robinson and Sara Germano, "U.S. Speedskating to Drop Controversial Under Armour Suits." *The Wall Street Journal*. February 14, 2014. Accessed February 27, 2014 < <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304703804579383010048360726>>.

<sup>4</sup> *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 208.