

Sermon for Sunday, November 8, 2009

Dr. Dan Doriani

ENDURANCE

Hebrews 12:1-3

My time in Korea was great but I never could sleep much, maybe 10:30 to 4:30. On the day of the second conference, I was wide awake at 3:30. I had to catch a speed train across the country, meet pastors and leaders, answer questions, then teach from 2-9:30. The last session was from 7:30-9:30. I was exhausted and the host of the conference. knew it. So he told everyone, "Our lecturer and his translator are very tired. Up since early, so we must pray for them." Suddenly he began to pray in a loud voice and the whole crowd, maybe 500 people, began praying for us, all aloud, in their own words. The building swelled with a happy roar that lasted several minutes. I got chills. I also got a burst of energy and the auditorium was filled with electricity. I lectured with gusto for two hours, no break, nobody stirred. Our best session – they carried me so I could endure to the end.

The theme of Hebrews 12 is endurance and the church had run out of endurance. Much of the problem was spiritual lethargy. The church was unprepared for hardship. When persecution swept down on them, many thought of giving up the faith or at least making their faith invisible - stay away from church, from Christians.

We don't face persecution as many Christians do or did. Few of us have faced real persecution and perhaps few ever will. But we do face adversity. Jesus predicted, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Even the happiest folk meet many trials and hardships. We get tired, we have too much to do. We wonder where our energy went. We wonder, "Where will I get the strength to endure?"

Where do we gain strength to endure? Hebrews says: Not by looking inward, for our own resources, or back, to easier days past, but by looking forward, to the finish line. Hebrews 11 offers a fresh perspective on the faith. It tells us to live out our faith with an eye on the future, not just the past or the present.

We think of Christ accomplishing salvation in history- rightly so. Or we think of the day we came to faith, also in the past. And of course we consider God's faithfulness to us and ours to Him in the present.

Now Hebrews is steeped in Old Testament history, but it stresses that faith looks forward, to the future. God's future faithfulness applies to our present needs. Hebrews teaches us to look to the future in light of God's promises. It says unseen things can be certain, that the future changes the present. That's the theme of Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11 – Old Testament heroes were guided by faith in God's promises for the future

Consider these notable cases: Noah built an ark, for 120 years, because God promised, "One day it will rain" (11:7).

Abraham, our father, lived on the basis of promises: "I will give you a land, I will give you a son and make you a blessing to the nations". He received only a fraction of them in this life. He waited for a son and lived in tents, waiting for an immovable city. He was still waiting, still living by faith when he died (11:8-13).

Other patriarchs looked to the future, too. As Joseph died in Egypt, he ordered his sons to take his bones to Canaan, the Promised Land. The bones waited 400 years, but Joseph knew the land would be theirs - and his (11:22). From Moses to Rahab, all anticipated deliverance, all hoped for a land and waited until God's promises were fulfilled. Note: These were not perfect people! They were sinners, but believers.

An uneasy waiting

Scan the list of the heroes of the faith and notice something else. They waited and there was no promise of ease while they waited. Some heroes of the faith accomplished great things by faith. They conquered kingdoms, routed armies, and administered justice (11:33-34, 36).

But other heroes only escaped by faith. Their accomplishment is escape from lions, flames and swords. They endured jeers, floggings and chains (11:33-34).

Further, some heroes were not delivered in this life at all (11:35b-38). Some escaped sword, some were murdered by it (11:34, 37). It is essential to hear this, then and now. For many people, the only deliverance is through death. In either case, faith applies the hope of future blessing to the present struggle. Because of the future, even those who died are heroes of the faith.

This is what gives us endurance. We hope for, but do not need to be a success in this life. We aren't responsible to get results or to win. We're responsible to do good and to aim for the good, but we leave the results to God. And we keep running in the race God has marked out for us.

2. Traits of the race (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Hebrews compares the Christian life to a long race toward a goal. By running the race, we show faithfulness in the present. This is the central idea of Hebrews 12. In this race we don't run alone. We are "surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Hebrews has a play on words that does not show in English: 11:39 says heroes were attested *marturhqevnte*", by God, for their faith. But now they are a cloud of testifiers *martuvrwn*.

That is, God testified publicly that they were faithful to Him in their trial. But they also testify that God was faithful to them in their trial - even if they died. They say, first, that unseen things are real. Love is real, friendship is real. The faithfulness of God is, too.

Second, in trials, we may conquer, escape or die. God is faithful in all three. Christ awaits us at the end of each. With that in mind, He feels free to give us instructions about running, which we consider carefully.

First, who shall run? We run. Hebrews says, literally, "Consequently we ourselves run." *toigarou'n kai; hJmei*" The Christian life is a marathon and we run toward a better city, whose builder and host is God (11:10-16).

So, he says, "let us run with endurance the course laid out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of the faith." Next He explains the character of the race and motives to run.

Second, why we run. We run because "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" They are not spectators, but witnesses. They don't just cheer for us, clapping hands, "Well done, young man." They have run the race, played the game. They know how hard it is. They have already finished the race and now testify, "You can do it, too. God will empower you!"

Next he tells us how to run. First, we "lay aside every burden." We throw off everything that hinders - all clothing that inhibits movement.

Runners do not wear heavy clothes. We have heard the descriptions: This shirt weighs half an ounce, those shorts, one ounce, the shoes, six ounces. The total weighs less than a pound. It is unthinkable to run in boots or a sweater.

Clothes that weigh us down is a metaphor for the sin that weighs us down. Sin is like heavy boots on the feet, like a heavy wet sweatshirt on the back - a burden.

Notice that "burden" is singular. The author has less concern with particular sins than with the general ability of sin to weigh us down. Sin in general is the problem. We need to get rid of it.

How shall we run? "Let us run with endurance." This is not a sprint. The course stretches out for miles and miles; this race is as long as life itself. We must persevere. We need to have something left in the fourth quarter, even if we have played every minute. We need mental and spiritual toughness.

Where shall we run? "Let us run the race that is laid out, prescribed or appointed. Metaphorically, we must run in our lanes, down the proper path. We must ski inside the gates. That is, God has laid out a course for our life. The Hebrews faced a course that included persecution, perhaps death. But we must run inside the course He chooses, sets or appoints, whether difficult or easy.

In fact, every one of us has a life course set by God, and every one of us could complain about it. One person grew up in a tough home. Another had loving parents who divorced. Another has been sick year after year. Others: short, bald, bad skin, no energy, terrors of the soul. Even if someone has dozens of things going their way, we each have problems.

Most of them are big and all too familiar: Chronic illness, loss of income, career out of control. Your best friend moves away. God has a path for each of us and we must run in that path.

As we run, we fix our eyes on the goal: Jesus is champion and perfecter of the faith. Past heroes of the faith encourage us, Jesus does yet more. He endured greater pain than the others. His wait had greater tension and greater resolution.

The idea is, if even Jesus had to endure suffering, can we expect exemption? And if we follow him, we can expect a glorious end, like his.

So we run fixing our eyes on him, meditating on him. Not gritting our teeth but running toward our beloved. Not distracted, we fix our eyes on the goal, Jesus. He stands at the finish line, waiting for us. This leads to our next motive.

We run for the sake of Jesus himself

Hebrews 12:2 literally says, "Fixing our eyes on the author and perfecter of the faith, Jesus." Hebrews saves the name Jesus for last for emphasis, for drama. Jesus is our champion, the perfecter of the faith.

Hebrews 2 explains how Jesus is a champion (2:10-15). By his death he destroyed Satan who held the power of death and freed us from the fear of death.

Jesus is also perfecter of the faith. He brings us to maturity, consecrates us. So while he tells us to run, and to consecrate ourselves to the task, he also works in us. Years ago, my daughter Sarah wanted to have diving board privileges at our pool. Children had to demonstrate that there was no hazard to them by swimming the width of the pool as a guard watched. That was going to be a challenge for her, so she asked me to stay with her as she swam. I replied, "I will be right here beside the pool if you need me." She said, "No, I want you in the pool with me." I replied, "You know I can't help you." Sarah said, "I know, just stand beside me".

Now Jesus isn't just standing beside the pool shouting, "Swim, swim." In the incarnation, he got right in the pool with us. But more than that, his Spirit is helping us, his hand holds us up, help us toward the finish line.

Jesus models endurance in the face of troubles that tempt us to quit the race. Hebrews 12:2 says, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down."

We ordinarily read the phrase "for the joy set before him" this way: Jesus endured the cross and its shame for the sake of the joy that would be his at the resurrection. He suffered for the joy, to gain the joy, the reward.

Certainly Jesus went to the cross looking forward to his coming glory. And knowledge of future glory certainly should empower us to endure.

But there is something else here. The Greek word "for" *anti* in "for the joy" typically means "instead of," with the idea of a substitution. That is, instead of the joy set before him in heaven, Jesus chose the cross. So Jesus chose the cross over bliss and ease in heaven.

So Jesus ran, enduring more than a long race. He endured the cross. Hebrews says how he did it: He despised its disgrace and shame *kataphroneo*. He weighed pain and shame, but esteemed them lightly. He preferred the good but hard road.

So then, "Consider the one who has endured such opposition from sinners, so you might not become weary by losing heart" (12:3). Consider him and don't lose heart.

The goal and the heart. Hebrews fears weariness, losing heart.

This is always the danger when things become difficult. We don't lose the skills, we lose the passion, the fire to use them. With your business: in finance or construction. Have your skills evaporated? No, but you must keep plugging away, in our work, when starting any new mission. There is always a time when we say, "This may fail. I may be working in vain. Maybe I should quit." It could be working on a dissertation, teaching small children, trying to revitalize a church. Further academia. I should just quit. I'll never use this.

"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (12:4) Hebrews compares the Christians life to a boxing match, where contestants often drew blood. Seneca says the true athlete is one who "saw his own blood." Hebrews says they have become soft. They can hardly run and the sight of blood scares them. How can they endure? How can we endure? I think of a past experience.

The race

As a young man, I never ran except to chase a ball. But I broke my ankle when I was thirty and began to run a little to rebuild my strength. I ran alone, but a few times I ran with friend who was a somewhat serious runner. One day he invited me to join him in 10K run in three weeks. I had never run in a race and had never gone much more than three miles. But he said it would be good to do it together, so I agreed to try it.

When the time came, I was too excited and I started too fast for my pitiful training. I ran the first two miles in seven minutes. No surprise, I got a cramp going up a hill in the third mile. I was running slower and slower; everyone was passing us. Most galling, a short, roly-poly woman in a hideous black mesh outfit passed us. I thought, "This is intolerable.". So I sped up and passed her, the cramp returned, I slowed down, she passed us again. This was repeated.

This lasted a full mile. I wanted to quit, thinking, "The pain will never pass and I'm ruining the race for John." I urged John to go on without me. He refused, encouraged me, and the cramp subsided a little later.

"OK" he said, "See that guy in the striped hat ahead of us?"

"That guy?" I pointed fifty yards ahead.

"No, the tall guy, way ahead," pointing more than a quarter mile ahead.

"I see him," I replied.

"We're going to finish ahead of that guy; let's go." I thought he was crazy, but we took off. We began passing people right and left. We left the roly-poly woman in dust. We passed some people who looked pretty good to me, keeping that striped hat in sight. With a mile to go, we passed the striped hat.

A woman barked out time. My friend said, "You're doing great, I'm taking off. See you at the finish line." He began to fly. I was crushed and it seemed that he passed ten people and gained seventy-five yards on me in twenty seconds. But I was feeling good and took off after him: "I'll never catch him, but

I'm going to place after him" and I began passing people too. The race ended downtown and soon I had just four long blocks to go. There were still six people between my friend and me, and I had to catch them all and I passed one, two, three.

Now it's the last two blocks; the streets are lined with the best runners, who are cheering us on. I locked eyes with one; he saw that I had something to accomplish. He screamed the encouragement to me, pumping his fist in the air. "Come on! Finish with nothing left!" My hair caught fire. My feet sprouted wings. I soared over the final yards, catching everyone, finishing just behind my friend, feeling great.

The race of life is a lot like this. We get cramps, the pain won't go away, we're going nowhere. The race is no fun; worse, it's painful, humiliating. We want to quit, end the pain and frustration. This is when we must endure. How?

First, When I was failing, my friend stuck with me. (Recently it was the prayers of brothers (and yours) in Korea.) He wouldn't let me quit. That is why Hebrews says, "Encourage one another daily... Stimulate each other to good deeds" (3:13, 10:24). We need each other.

Second, the cloud of witnesses spurred me on. They finished the race; I can too. The runner who shouted, "Finish with nothing left" looked tired enough. He finished with nothing left; I can, too. I enjoyed my 10 K but it lasted forty-four minutes – not long. At the finish line that day, there were a few dozen citizens, including our wives. I received a little silver ribbon, signifying that we did reasonably well. What about the real race? People are lining that course, too.

We see:

- Abraham who wandered in Canaan while God started a new family.
- Joseph betrayed by his brothers, then saving them in Egypt.
- Moses leading a grumbling people out of slavery, never entering the Promised Land.
- Caleb leading reluctant people into the Promised Land.
- David persecuted just for being a gifted warrior and singer.
- Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel telling truths no one wanted to hear.
- So many of these men sinned grievously or wanted to give up.

Then Peter, James, Paul and so many of that generation who died for Christ and are now living with him. These heroes and so many more cheer us on. They testify: "By God's strength, we finished race and you will too."

We look at finish line. There are no officials; there is no clock. But we see Jesus, the winner's wreath on his head, holding a wreath for all of you. For you! He, too, calls out the encouragement. To one he shouts, "Come on, finish with nothing left!" To another, "One more step, one more step." He says, "Don't despair; I will never leave you nor forsake you."

We keep ears and eyes on him, but as we draw nearer, we notice that he stands on no mean city streets. No, his feet are in the streets of the New Jerusalem. When we finish the race, we pass the gate of heaven itself.

Endurance is more than holding onto the faith. It encompasses every sphere of life. Abraham waited for a son, so endurance may mean waiting till we resolve a problem with children, with family relationships. Jesus is the author and perfecter of your home. Let's endure to the end.

Moses endured in the great task of Israel out of Egypt. So, many of us must endure in a great project. Jesus is your champion and perfecter in that project – if it's godly and good.

The prophets had to endure as they told the truth about society. So must journalists, teachers, politicians – even if no one wants to listen.

These brave men speak to us. They teach us to remember that Jesus is our champion, the author and perfecter of the faith every day. At work, do we look to more than the end of the day, the week, the season, the project of the moment? The Lord is the author and perfecter of my work, my day.

At home we have chores and budgets and bills and lots of work and we just want a break soon. Jesus is champion, author and perfecter of our home – the goals of my cleaning and cooking and caring for children.

Jesus is champion, author and perfecter of schools, hospitals, the church. We see the next service, the budget meeting, the ministry management. Even the church can become preoccupied with tasks. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus.

We could continue in every sphere of life. And in them all, remember the word of Hebrews: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Yes, "Fix your eyes on Jesus." Consider how he endured through pain, humiliation, even death. "We haven't resisted to the point of shedding blood. We'll never suffer as he did, but he is our example of endurance.

Yet, he is more than an example. He doesn't just show the way through the path, he cleared the path. He is our champion. He threw down our great adversary, who had power of death. Even more, he is also the perfecter of our faith. He carries us to the end, so we can finish strong.