

Hebrews 12:1-2

A cross-country race is exciting to watch. After the runners take off, the fans don't sit down in their seats to cheer them on—they run. In order to encourage the runners in the race, the fans themselves have to run to various places on the 3.1 mile course. This is not a fast sprint. This is a long, drawn-out trek up and down hills, over grassy fields, through wooded areas. And the fans encourage each and every runner no matter how far ahead or how far behind they are. Some of the runners will finish the race in fifteen or sixteen minutes. Others will come in a few minutes later. And the fans cheer for each one. Even that runner who finishes dead last—a good thirty minutes after the race has already been won—the fans applaud and encourage that runner as he or she approaches the finish line. Because in a cross-country race, even though everyone competes to win, everyone who finishes is truly a winner.

That's the race we're running. It's not a sprint. It's a long, drawn-out course. It's marked out for us. There are runners ahead of us and runners behind us. The goal is not to win the race. The goal is to finish. It's not easy to finish. It's much easier to give up. But Jesus did not put you in the race so that you would give up along the way. He put you in so that you would cross the finish line; so that you would enter into the paradise of heaven.

You were put in the race at your baptism. Jesus is the Author of your faith, and at your baptism He marked out the course for you to run. It's not a sprint. It's a race of perseverance. It's a matter of walking through life by faith; trusting in Christ through all the "ups" and "downs;" holding on to His promises no matter how rough the terrain becomes. It's a matter of "fixing our eyes on Jesus." But that's not as easy as it sounds because there are many other things through life that we like to fix our eyes upon. And not all of these things are sinful. That's what makes it so tough to persevere, because life itself becomes so distracting.

We're committed to our jobs and careers—so committed that it becomes difficult to find time for private and family devotions through the day. Our lives are so busy that when we do sit down in God's House our minds often wander and make plans for the coming week. It's not that we despise Jesus and His Word; it's just that everything else in life takes so much of our attention that fixing our eyes on Him is not something that comes easy.

And then there's the sin which so easily entangles us. There are days when we do despise God. We don't want to open His Word to us because we're holding on to a sinful habit that we don't want to break, and we don't want to hear what God has to say to us about it. There are days when we're so angry at someone that we don't want to come to God's House and act like everything is just fine. And sometimes we're just plain lazy. Too lazy to open our Bible. Too lazy to make the effort to sit for an hour or two in the House of the Lord.

Our sins do entangle us rather easily and it becomes difficult to run our race. It's much easier to slow down our pace and eventually come to a stop. And the whole time we're doing this we deceive ourselves into believing that we're still in the race; that we'll still make it across the finish line somehow. Don't be fooled. The path through the desert became littered with Israelites who gave up. They stopped walking toward Canaan. They

quit following Moses. They grew weary of fixing their eyes on Christ and so they never made it.

You know of some today, perhaps loved ones in your family, who have stopped running. They have become distracted with a busy work schedule. They have personal issues. They have slowed down and quit the race. And you hurt for them. And it seems like all of your encouraging falls upon deaf ears.

It's tough to persevere. It's much easier to give up. That's why cross-country runners run together. It's much more difficult to run the race alone. Running together helps them to keep going even when the going becomes difficult.

That's why we are a congregation. We don't run our race alone. We worship together. We pray together. Together we confess our sins. Together we hear the word of forgiveness and receive our Lord's body and blood. Together we study His Word. Even though each Christian believes for himself, we're not by ourselves. It's never "Jesus and me." We're not little churches unto ourselves. Jesus has brought us, through Holy Baptism, into His Church, the congregation of believers. And so we run our race together. We each run our own race, but as we run our race through life we encourage each other, we pray for each other, we help each other. When someone becomes weary, the rest of us can speak the nourishing and strengthening Word of God to him or her. When someone in our midst becomes distracted and stops fixing their eyes on Jesus, the rest of us can encourage them to get back in the race. When someone becomes entangled in sin, the rest of us can rebuke (yes, rebuke) them with the Law of God so that we can then point them again to Jesus and His forgiveness.

God wants you to know that others have already crossed the finish line. The saints who have gone before us surround us like a "cloud of witnesses," and we are encouraged by their perseverance. Loved ones of yours who persevered in their faith surround us as we run. Many of the Old and New Testament saints suffered for being Christians. They watched loved ones being put to death and yet refused to take their eyes off Jesus. And now they all rest from their labors and are living testimonies to us that our struggles here cannot compare to the glory that awaits us.

Jesus knows how tough it is to persevere. He Himself struggled with this. In Gethsemane He sweated drops of blood. It was pure agony for Him to keep walking toward Calvary. And yet He did it. Why? Because of "the joy set before Him." You are His joy. We fix our eyes on Jesus now, but do you realize that when He was walking to the cross His eyes were fixed on you? You are His joy and delight. You are the reason He kept going. Yes, He suffered intense pain, but it gave Him great joy to suffer for you. Without you before His eyes He would never have been able to persevere. But because He was dying for you, He had great joy as He hung on the cross.

It gave Him great joy to say as He hung there, "Father, forgive them." It's you He is speaking of. It's you He was dying to forgive. You are His joy, and He has great joy in telling you through the mouth of your pastor that "You are forgiven!" No matter where you are in your race, you are forgiven. No matter how slow you have been running your race, you are forgiven. For all those times when you have taken your eyes off of Jesus, He

forgives you. Every sin which so easily entangles you is not a burden for you anymore—Jesus forgives all of them...He forgives you.

He knows there are days when you just don't feel like running. He is there for you, and He will never give up on you. Jesus went to Calvary for you and He won't quit on you now. He's not a "coach" on the sidelines telling you how to run—He's your Savior! He is the "Author and finisher of your faith." He put you in the race. He's the course upon which you run. He's the finish line to receive you at the end. He's your crutch, your walker. He pushes you in your wheelchair through the race because He knows that there are times when you are just too weak to run. He picks you up when you fall. He is your strength, your nourishment...and every step along the way He keeps forgiving you.

And that's why you can keep going. That's the reason why you can persevere. That's why you can open your Bible day after day, and study it here with the rest of us. That's why you can make Sunday the Lord's Day—because you're still in the race. And you know that Jesus is here with you and for you. And He will never, ever give up on you. Amen.