

## ***Jesus the Finisher of the Race***

Sermon Series on Hebrews

Kenwood Baptist Church

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**TEXT:** Hebrews 12:1-13

Good morning, Kenwood. It has come to my attention with increasing frequency that the real life of the church, week to week, is actually what happens in between Sundays. I was reflecting on that even yesterday, thinking of Kenwood's involvement in our community. Did you know that our students went downtown Cincinnati and passed out blessing bags and prayed for people that they met downtown, a source of encouragement to them? Yesterday, a group of us participated in a volleyball tournament that was sponsoring what used to be called Pregnancy Care and is now called Life Forward. We helped raise \$11,000 for at-risk pregnancies in our city. No boasting, but our team took the semi-finalist round. Pastor Fred told me that as they were downtown, that people had heard of Kenwood. That is certainly not for our reputation of fame, but to be present in the community. We are blessed to be a blessing. Our family had the privilege yesterday of our participating in a wedding for my niece in Michigan, and praise God, it was a joyful time. She is going to be moving to Cincinnati in just a few weeks. The University of Cincinnati received 11,000 applications for 200 spots in their medical school, and she is going to be one of those. She asked me this question: "Is there any Christian ministry that's connected with the UC medical school at all?" I said: "Let me think about that for a minute!" There is an outpost of the Kingdom of the medical school. Others of you have moved around the city in exercise of pastoral care and visited people who were sick or in the hospital. Those are very real and important moments where the body of Christ is lived out among us. Next week, we will have the opportunity with Go Local! to serve our neighbors. I really encourage you to participate. You get to know Kenwood but also be present to the community, so I encourage you to participate. The last thing I want to tell you just very briefly is I want to thank Kyle Lipps and our AV team for upgrading what we are able to do and distribute ministry digitally. This is extremely important, and it's part of the world we live in. They did an amazing job of editing and distributing the talks that N.T. Wright did at Kenwood. I'm thankful for that, and let me tell you the most encouraging thing. Kyle is a very understated guy. He doesn't get amped up easily. He plays the bass, he runs the sound. He emailed me at 11 PM with the news that just under a thousand people have seen those videos already. The most exciting thing to me, and I think to him, was he sent us a map of where people are who watch those, and they are literally all over the world: Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America. Praise God that our church is at work. We have people right now serving missions in South America and Asia. God is

at work, and it is a joy to be part of God's Kingdom, and the work that happens in between Sundays. Sunday is important, though, to sustain that work, and we need to worship, to be reminded of who God is, and then we also need His instruction daily to teach us how we are to live in the way in which we should go.

This morning we turn to Hebrews 12. We fix our attention on the imagery that Jesus is the finisher of the race. Hebrews 12 has an extended athletic image, and the image of this race will dominate the entire passage. In the sermon this morning, we want to stay inside the imagery that Hebrews 12 uses. For those of us who have been in Cincinnati for a while, the image of a race is near and dear to our hearts. Just last weekend we had the Flying Pig Marathon, the 19th



Flying Pig Marathon, and there were more than 37,000 people who participated in the marathon events. The woman's marathon winner, Kerry Lee, was Anderson High School's cross country coach, and she finished second in 2011, 2013, and 2015. She finished third in 2012 and 2014, and this year she won! What an image of perseverance. Jack Randall, at the ripe age of 22, just graduated from UC, ran the first time ever and won. I mean, "Congratulations, Jack, but I actually feel more deeply moved by Kelly's accomplishment." The image of a race comes before us powerfully in Hebrews 12, so keep your Bible open. Let's look at this beautiful

and wonderful passage. Hebrews 12:1 begins and says:

*"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,"*

We are taken from Hebrews 11 and the great Hall of Fame of faithful men and women who have gone before us, and at the end of the sermon last week, we said that Hebrews 11 has an open ending and we are to join in that cloud of witnesses. We are to join in that great company of people who have lived and were found to be faithful, and so Hebrews 12 begins and says we ourselves are also surrounded by this cloud. The imagery that is of an athletic stadium. The Greek term *cloud* doesn't mean that the witnesses are up there, but *cloud* is used in Greek to signify a crowd. To be surrounded by a group of onlookers suggests immediately the architecture of the stadium. The word *stadium* comes from the Greek word for the central track event of antiquity, the 200 meter, and the stadium was constructed in a horseshoe shape so that those who watched could be seated all around, with the end goal clearly in view. The athletic imagery becomes even more vivid as the writer says that we should lay aside every weight, every excess burden. You can't run well carrying extra baggage. He says to lay aside every weight. That weight or burden is interpreted as the sin that clings closely to us. This is another one of those places in Hebrews where the amazing display of vocabulary is evident

where he uses a word that no one else used in the New Testament. Some scholars think he just made it up. It is not just sin; it is not just clinging sin; it is easily-clinging-to-you sin. Some of you are thinking about high performance wicking fabrics and athletic gear that has proper venting, but the image is that we are surrounded, we are in a stadium.

After reviewing this great list of heroes and heroines of faith, all of a sudden we find ourselves in Hebrews 12 standing on the track, and instead of our eyes on them, the imagery is that their eyes are on us. All of a sudden, we are told to get rid of extra weight. We are told to get rid of sin that that clings to us and inhibits our movements. Then, finally in Hebrews 12:1, one summons is given to us:

*“. . . and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,”*

Let us take off. We hear the sound of the starter signaling that we are to run the race that is set before us, the race, the route that is marked out, stretching out in front of us. The writer says go, and we start running. I ran track in college, but I pole vaulted, so no one ever said ‘go.’ It was a self-start. When you are ready, you do this very counterintuitive thing—run as fast as you can with a fiberglass pole, stick it into the ground, and hope good things happen. No one would tell you to do that, and so you had to do that on your own—say ‘go.’ But I loved watching the other events, and I found track to be a very moving thing to participate in and watch. Pole vaulting was at the beginning of an all-day track meet, so we would jump and then we would be done. The other people that started at the beginning were the distance runners, and sometimes the 5,000 or 10,000 meter race, they would say ‘go,’ and we would vault, compete, and be done, and these guys would still be looping around. How many times are they going around that track? The 10,000 meter runners go around 25 times! That requires endurance, and the image of Hebrews 12 is an endurance run. It is not a sprint. If you think life is a sprint, then you're out of touch with reality. Life is at least an 800. It is probably more like a mile or two, and it might even be a half or full marathon. We are summoned to run in a way that runs with perseverance, endurance. That's the word we mentioned a couple weeks ago: fortitude, strength. It will require significant, sustained effort to finish, but as we run, Hebrews 12:2 tells us where our focus is:

*“. . . looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith,”*

We are literally to look off in the distance, and as we look, we look to the end of the race and we see Jesus standing there. Just as we are surrounded by this company, this crowd of faithful men and women who have gone before us, there is Jesus, standing at the finish line. The writer expresses this beautifully. When we look to Jesus, what do we see? We see He is the founder and perfecter of our faith. The Greek imagery says that Jesus is literally the *beginner* and the *finisher*. He is the starter and the ender. That means that Jesus has run the very race that is set before us, the race that we are invited to go through in this life. The course has not only been

marked out by Jesus in advanced, He has run the course and He is standing there at the finish line. He is the beginner and the finisher of faith, the founder, perfecter. We see the nature of the course then continuing in Hebrews 12:2b:

*“. . . who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

The nature of this race is that it ends with joy. You need to know that, by the way. You need to know that the ending is filled with incomparable joy. I have never run a full marathon. I've been increasing my distances and I'd like to try to do that someday. Of those in our congregation who have run marathons, I've asked them tell me about their experience. Roy Friesen has run a couple. I said, "Roy, what was it like finishing the marathon?" Roy said, "Both times I've finished, I went straight to the medical tent. I didn't have a really a glorious ending." But this race, if you finish this race, there's joy. There's no medical tent. Everyone who finishes is greeted with great joy, and that joy is the joy that Christ experienced at the end of the race—*the joy set before Him.*

What is that joy? Remember back in Hebrews 1 and 2: *"Who for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross,"* recalling that Jesus runs a race in order to gather an innumerable multitude of redeemed with Him. *"Here I am," He says in Hebrews 2, "and all those You have given Me."* The race that Jesus runs gathers an innumerable multitude of the redeemed. There is joy at the ending, and with that clear ending in sight, He is able to endure the cross. That means brothers and sisters that there are cross-shaped stations along the way of this race and that this race runs through the cross to glory, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. The cross was an emblem of shame in antiquity. The Roman orator Cicero said that the word cross was beneath the dignity of the free Roman to even use, so shameful. An emblem of shame designed to humiliate, and when you're raised up naked on a cross to die slowly, in agony, the writer of Hebrews in two words inverts that imagery and says: "No, no. Jesus was not lifted up in shame. He looked down on the shame of the cross because it was actually the way that He would save humanity"—the joy set before Him, and He is enthroned today, and that is where He sits. As we run this race, our eyes look to Him.

As we run, we are going to need encouragement along the way. The rest of the passage imagines us to be running, so I want you to imagine, even as you're listening to the sermon, that the gun has gone off and that we are actually running. The race is underway, and we are going. Our eyes are fixed on Jesus. Beginning in Hebrews 12:3, the writer says:

*"Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."*

*"Consider Him,"* in the ESV. The Greek comparative is actually, *make an analogy between Jesus'*

*race in your own.* So, we are in this extended comparison with the race that Christ has run, and we need and hear His voice encouraging us along the way. The first piece of encouragement we need, as we make an analogy between Christ race and successful completion of our own, is that there are going to be obstacles along the way. Make the analogy between you and Him who endured hostility. There are cultural headwinds. Whenever a church really starts to impact the community, there is going to be opposition. There can be discouragement; there can be hills that you didn't expect. It's amazing when you're running how much more sensitive you are to elevation changes. So the first word of encouragement is that there are challenges in the journey, but keep going, don't quit. In Hebrews 12:4, we read:

*“In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.”*

The Greek word for *in your struggle*, or your agony, is the word for *contest*. In modern Greek the Olympic games are called the Olympic *agonies*, the Olympic *struggles* or *contests*, and the writer says, with this voice that comes to us on the analogy of Christ, with the authority of Scripture, that you have more to give. Keep going. In your race, you have not resisted to the point of shedding blood. Sometimes when you're running, you think you need to quit, to preserve your energy. You're getting a cramp. The Lord says, “Keep going, keep going.” In Hebrews 12:5, we hear this voice of encouragement, exhortation. The writer says:

*“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?”*

There's a voice along the way in the race that we need to tune our ears to. It is not the voice of the culture; it's not the voice of doubt; it's not the voice of the enemy of our souls. The voice of encouragement comes to us as the voice of our heavenly Father. Hear our heavenly Father. Where does our heavenly Father speak this word of encouragement to us? He speaks it in His Word. Don't miss that. This voice of encouragement comes in Hebrews 12:5-6 with a Scripture citation from Proverbs 3:11-12:

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by Him. For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son whom He receives.”*

In other words, the writer says: “Trust your training. Trust your training in this race. Hear the voice of your heavenly Father encouraging you to keep going along the way.” There will be obstacles, cultural headwinds, moments when you'll be tempted to quit. You need to be reminded that you have more yet to give inside of you and that you been trained. When we hear the word *discipline*, some of us think of corporal punishment. No track coach ever sees a gifted runner coming around for the key lap and starts lashing him. I've never seen that, and I've been to a lot of track meets. Discipline. We sometimes hear that word and think that means punitive correction, and yet we hear the word *disciple* and our hearts thrill. If you take

*discipline* out of *disciple*, you don't have much. They are the same word. The discipline of the Lord is submitting ourselves to His training regimen. It's trusting Him to prepare us. It's trusting Him to have a proper diet, race preparation. Discipline involves saying 'no' to bad things and sometimes saying 'no' to good things that aren't great. So, do not regard lightly His discipline. The Lord is preparing us to finish the race.

The citation from Proverbs 3 follows the Septuagint translation, and you'll notice a very small difference in the very last line. The Septuagint version translates the last line as: . . . *the Lord will chastise every son received*. When you read Proverbs 3:12 in your English Bible, that is translated directly from the Hebrew, the last line will read: . . . *as a father, the son in whom he delights*. The difference and origin of those variants is the Hebrew word *caab* and whether it has a space in it or not. This passage follows the Septuagint. But the main point is to trust your training, and the Lord disciplines us.

Continuing on in the race image in Hebrews 12:7, we read:

*"It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?"*

We have to persevere, and when we persevere, when we don't quit, we actually become stronger. Despite the obstacles, the headwinds, the moments when we want to quit, when we have a cramp, we trust our training and we continue. As we do so, the Lord makes us stronger as the race progresses. We get stronger, and that hidden foundation of training ends up showing our legitimacy as children and as athletes in the race. Hebrews 12:8 says:

*"If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."*

It is like running out of the stands and joining the marathon on the last lap. That is not allowed. The discipline that goes with the race marks us as legitimate competitors. There is no discipleship without discipline; there's no contest without commitment; no *agon* without *agonia*.

The writer continues and keeps before us the image of our heavenly Father and His goal along the way. Have you ever wondered why the Lord did not just save us and then sanctify us immediately? My working hypothesis on that is that if He did that, we wouldn't recognize each other. I have only pastoral and personal experience on that. I have no Scripture for that, but if He saved us and then totally transformed us into Christ-likeness, people would be saying, "What happened to David?" But it's God's wisdom, isn't it, to include the book of Numbers. You have to have that to get the big story that in between gospel-saving action and final inheritance there is this journey, there is this race, and that is where we learn to trust God. That is where

you learn to become Christ-like and depend on Him. The writer gives an extended analogy of our heavenly Father who deals with us, just like our earthly father, and it is fitting for us to note this as parents, especially this on Mother's Day, even though the imagery is to fathers. In Hebrews 12:9, the writer says:

*“Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?”*

We've had earthly fathers who disciplined us. They trained us. They sometimes said 'No.' Moms and dads, sometimes the best thing you can ever say to a child is 'No.' Sometimes the best thing you can say to a child is: "You need to obey right away, all the way, and with a good attitude." We had earthly fathers who disciplined us, or trained us, and the outcome of that is respect. We respected them. Then there is a beautiful *Qal va-homer*. Those who have been around for a while can spot them now: "Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits?" That is our heavenly Father. Notice that the outcome of our heavenly Father's discipline is not just respect. The outcome, the *"how much more"* is life. When we learn to follow Him, to submit to and receive the program, the training regimen, the corrective word of our heavenly Father, the outcome is that we really start living, and we are going to be increasingly dealing in less death. We will live. Don't become embittered or resentful, but trust the Father's intention and purpose.

I like to cycle occasionally, and one of the people that leads the group I cycle with periodically has all these different ways of cycling, and some of them are particularly painful. Some rides are great and fun; everyone's happy and really glad that Chris is leading the ride. Then there are other rides, about halfway through, our body is cramping, and we're feeling, "I don't really like Chris that much. Why is he doing this to us all? We agreed to do this? Is he nice? Does he have our good in mind?" As those particular rights will end, he has this line: "You know, that was a great workout. It was one of those 'hate your instructor' kind of workouts. But actually he really had our good in view. We need to know that so we can trust the Father. Sometimes our heavenly Father has a portion of training for us that we would not choose. Sometimes He has a portion of training to which we would say, "That hill is too steep." Sometimes He has a portion of training for us and we say, "That ground is too rough." And sometimes He has a portion of training or section of the race where we say, "I cannot do that." We need to trust Him because He says to us in His Word: "I will not give you more than you can bear." When we are tempted to quit, it's because we calculate our sufficiency on our own resources and we forget that there's Another running with us. We've lost sight of Him who stands at the finish line. Our heavenly Father trains us for life. In Hebrews 12:10, we read about our earthly parents:

*“For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.”*

The ultimate good and the reward of following in His program of training, of going with Him and not quitting, is that is that we share in His holiness. That is the best thing. When I think of my greatest ambition for my children, it's not a GPA; it's not a string of medals; it's not peer approbation. My greatest hope for my children is that the Lord would work in such a way in their lives that they will start to reflect and experience the holiness of their heavenly Father and that they will exhibit Christ-likeness. In some mysterious and sublime way, a pastor has that as his greatest ambition for his flock. I want us to be a people that grow in holiness, reflecting the beauty of the Lord. It's that ancient calling: *"Be holy, for I am holy, says the Lord."* We live, we share in His holiness, and the writer knows that we doubt this is a great goal or ambition, and so he tells us in one other related way in Hebrews 12:11:

*"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."*

We are often tempted to quit as all training, all discipline, all moments of the race seem painful, not pleasant. I remember the one time I was drafted to run in a two-mile relay as part of a B team, just to pick up a couple of extra points in a relay meet. My best friend from college ran in the first leg, and I ran in the second leg. I remember watching him. None of us was used to running that portion. He had the baton and ran down the backstretch. He was not looking good, and he was looking worse, and then he started looking like parts of the body that were to stay inside the body were ready to come out of the body, and I'm thinking: "Just give me that baton before you fall apart." He managed to hand me the baton, and he went straight to the bushes. He was there for the next 10 minutes, 'losing weight.' It seems painful, but this verse tells us what happens—in the end it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. If we want life and holiness and righteousness, then the Word of God to us this morning is to keep going and never quit. Finish the race, rivet our attention on Jesus.

The writer summons us to this in the very last words of this passage, in Hebrews 12:12-13:

*"Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed."*

He knows that at certain points in the race you start to droop your hands. He knows that your weak knees start to wobble and that your form deteriorates, and so the last exhortation is to lift up the drooping hands and strengthen, literally to set straight the weak knees, to make a straight path for your feet. There are times when every impulse in you says, "I'm hurting, I'm cramping, I need to stop. If I'm to be well, I need to stop. If I'll ever finish this race, I need to stop right now." And yet, Hebrew says: "If you want to finish the race, you keep going, because what's out of joint comes into alignment as we keep going, and what is injured becomes healed as we run, not by breaking off of the race and restarting at a later time." The Lord promises that

if we obey Him and keep going, we will be healed.

This passage, this race, has given us the graphic image for our series the spring. It has given us the title: *Fix Our Eyes on Jesus*, and when we do that, as we have attempted to all spring, what do we see? We see Jesus, standing at the finish line, at the head of an innumerable company of redeemed. We see Him who is the finisher of the race, and so we hear His voice this morning, whatever our particular circumstance, particular obstacle, hear Jesus Christ speak to you this day: "Keep going and never quit!" Hear Jesus Christ tell you: "You will have obstacles, course challenges, cultural headwinds, but keep going. Never quit!" Hear Jesus say to you this morning: "Trust your training. Discipline marks you as a legitimate competitor. Fix your eyes on Me; keep going; never quit; submit yourself to the Father's regiment." The Lord is producing in you, though you may not see it in this moment, He is working in your life holiness and righteousness. Keep going and never quit. Continued participation, not speed, is a crucial element. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Never quit. Keep going. Watch your form. That which feels out of joint will soon be healed. Keep going. Never quit. The stands are filled with voices cheering and Jesus himself stands at the finish line ready to receive you. Hallelujah! Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we praise You this morning. Lord, we need Your exhortation, and we need the confidence that comes from fixing our eyes on You. Lord, for many of us this morning we need a fresh breath of courage and bravery to keep going and never quit. Lord, some of us have grown daunted by the obstacles. Some of us have become unsure that the training was sufficient, so we ask You now this this day, this morning, to breathe life into us that we might keep going and never quit. Make us brave to run with perseverance, we pray.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.