

Session 4: Jesus, Founder and Perfector of our Faith

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[0 : 00] So I must confess that whenever I lived in the United States as a child, I neither knew anything about nor understood badminton.

! I only knew those American sports like American football and baseball. But in the past 17 years since my family has first moved to Malaysia, I've learned so much.

Now, I love playing badminton. I'm terrible. I'm absolutely terrible at it. But our church has a badminton group that gets together every Sunday night.

And we go out and we play for a couple of hours and then we go makan afterwards and we just have a great time together. I enjoyed the pictures from my friends who were playing last night, sending me pictures of the restaurant where they went afterwards.

And I was thinking, haha, but my dinner was better. So I absolutely love the sport. I think part of it is because whenever my family first moved to Malaysia in 2008, Dr. Lee Chong Wei was dominant.

[1 : 14] I mean, for a series of years, he was the top ranked player in the world. Despite holding the top ranking, yet in 2008, 2012 and 2016, the gold medal remained elusive.

Somehow the Chinese, I don't know, right? I mean, I don't know, right? Like it was like in those finals for each three times. Winning a gold medal in the Olympics takes an incredible combination of training, natural skill, health, luck, and many other factors.

Winning an Olympic gold medal in badminton, can you imagine it would bring such immense national pride to Malaysia? I think our best bet right now is with the women's doubles, right? Maybe so. We'll keep looking forward, right? But in the ancient Olympics, as you know, these have been around for a couple thousand years. In the ancient Olympics, the most prestigious of all events was known as the stadion.

Now, the stadion is where we get the word stadium. It was a foot race, and the winner of this foot race became known as the victor of victors of that year's Olympics.

[2 : 46] In fact, it was such a prestigious victory that today, over 2,000 years later, we still know the name of almost every winner of the stadion in the ancient Olympics.

The reason why is that if you won the stadion, the next year's Olympics were named after you. It may be that the author of Hebrews 12, 1 and 2 had such a specific race as the stadion in mind.

If not, he certainly had a similar race in mind. And as we see in these two verses, the passage draws on this race imagery when the author encourages readers to run the race, noting the crowd, the sacrifices that are necessary to win, and the pace setter who goes before.

Now, I think I wrote down three verses, and thank you for reading all three verses. But actually, this morning, it's only two verses. So our passage has two points that are based on the two main ideas in verse 1 and verse 2.

[4 : 12] First, we must remove any obstacles which slow us down or distract us. Second, we must pursue Jesus, our pace setter and our example.

And so the main idea of this morning's passage is very simple. Very simple. That others have set the example so we can do everything that is necessary to follow forward.

Sorry, to move forward in faith toward Jesus. So let's look together at our passage once again, where we are encouraged to remove the obstacles.

And we see this in the first verse. So look in your Bibles once again at Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1, where we see this.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.

[5 : 22] Therefore, Christians must remove any obstacles to pursue Jesus at full speed. Our passage begins with the word, therefore, which tells us that this morning's passage is based on everything that we have considered over the last two days in the previous messages during our camp.

In our passage, the author notes that those who run the race are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.

It's an interesting term, isn't it? A cloud of witnesses. Whenever I think of a group of people, I don't necessarily think of a crowd.

Yet in Greco-Roman literature, a cloud would often symbolize a massive crowd, where you cannot even distinguish the people because they are so many.

In fact, I think that the New Living Translation, if any of you are reading this, reading the NLT, it gives the sense well. It says, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd.

[6 : 42] And the crowd is full of witnesses. Often, whenever we hear the word witness, we think of someone who is giving testimony in a court.

Or maybe in Christian contexts, we think of those who share their faith about Jesus. They are giving witness to Jesus. Here, it simply means those who are witnessing an event.

Those who are looking at what is happening in front of them. In other words, spectators. The flawed but faithful stories of the various individuals that we considered in Hebrews chapter 11 are the spectators, who are now cheering on those who are running the race.

They have run the race before us. And they provide examples of faith so that we can race forward in faith toward Jesus.

And so with this imagery in mind, the author tells us to remove all obstacles and the sin that clings so closely.

[7 : 59] Some of us in the room are runners. How many of you would consider yourself a runner? I want to know. Come on. Let's be honest. I see a few hands. I see some hands going up. Right? Okay.

Some more hands are going up as they see the confidence of others raising their hands. That's good. In early 2013, I almost randomly decided to start running.

I weighed much more than I do now. At that time, I weighed over 130 kg. I didn't know how to run, but I was 33 years old and I just decided to start doing it.

At first, I started running on a treadmill, but to be honest, I could only run for maybe a minute. And so I would run and then I would walk on a treadmill or I would go outside of our house in Malacca and I would just run up and down the street as long as I would do it.

Then after a few months of doing this, I decided that it would be good motivation if I signed up for a race. Now, I had never run in a 5k or anything like this, but I decided to sign up for a half marathon.

[9 : 22] I knew that the challenge meant that I would have to work hard and make sacrifices to achieve the goal. I needed to train more outside.

I needed to eat better. I started scheduling runs at varying speeds and lengths. I bought my first Garmin watch and I ran the race.

The medal still hangs in my office at home. But then, I wanted to run faster half marathons. So I needed to lose more weight, sacrifice more entertainments to do training, wake up at 5am regularly, and do whatever else was necessary.

By 2015, I could run an hour and 40 minute half marathon, which isn't world class or anything. But considering that two years before that, I had never even run one, I was pleased.

And so in 2016, I was visiting my hometown of Dallas, Texas, and I decided to compete in the Dallas Marathon.

[10 : 34] What did this mean? It meant losing more weight. It meant sacrificing more time for training, even weekly runs that would often go three or four hours.

Eventually, in December 2016, I ran a full marathon at a pretty good pace. But to get to where I was in 2016 from where I was in 2013, only three months before, or three years before, required lots of sacrifice, giving up various distractions and removing various obstacles from my life.

In verse one, your translation might read, to lay aside the weight. Or your translation, like the NIV might read, to lay aside everything.

Weight is a possible translation of the word, but the meaning truly refers to what the NIV gets at here, whenever it's any obstacle or hindrance that would slow us down or keep us from running the

race.

One New Testament scholar says, the pastor wants his hearers to dispense with absolutely anything that will distract them from successfully running the race of faith.

[12:05] Now, this includes more than sin, but it certainly includes sin. And so the author notes that sin can cling so closely.

What sin does the author have in mind? Well, notice that he doesn't specify a sin. So one scholar says he's referring to sin in general, in totality, everything that is sin.

If we want to run the race that is set before us, we must remove any obstacle that keeps us from running at full speed to pursue Jesus.

Now, for each and every one of us, these obstacles look different. We don't have the same temptations. We don't have the same struggles or obstacles.

And these obstacles may not even be sin in and of themselves. You know, for some people, the obstacle may be something like a desire for acceptance.

[13:22] And so if you think about someone who is desiring acceptance, that's not a bad thing in and of itself. We all long to be accepted.

But maybe they don't pursue Jesus as they should because they love too deeply the praise and the acceptance of other people.

What Jesus calls us to do may cause us to not be accepted by everyone at times. It may cause us to not receive praise from other people at times.

But God did create us to desire acceptance and ultimately to find that acceptance in Christ and in his church and in our pursuit of him.

For others of us, the obstacle may look like something as simple as sermon podcasts, theology videos, and theology books.

[14:33] You didn't think I was going to say that, did you? We don't pursue Jesus because we're too busy filling every moment of silence in our lives with other voices in the form of podcasts, videos, and the rest, so that we can't hear clearly from God and his word.

For many of us, the obstacle is simply some type of sin. Primarily, I would assume for most people in this room, that it is some improper pursuit of money, sex, power, status, identity, entertainment, family, or comfort.

Each of our obstacles will look different. But we all know that there are obstacles in our lives that keep us from pursuing Jesus at full speed.

But why? What keeps us from removing the obstacles? Like, it sounds so simple, right?

Just remove the obstacles and the sin that clings so closely. But I think if we're honest, some of us love the obstacles.

[15:58] Whatever that obstacle may be. We crave the dopamine rush. We enjoy the immediate pleasure. We value the quick satisfaction that the obstacle gives us.

And so we don't remove the obstacle. And it slows our pursuit of Jesus. Others of us think that we need the obstacle.

We can't imagine our lives without the obstacle. We assume that everything in our life might even fall apart if we stopped turning to this sin, giving into this distraction, or craving this hindrance.

And so we don't remove the obstacle. And it slows our pursuit of Jesus. Some of us may even think that our obstacles help others.

We assume that if we don't give in and commit this or that sin, it will slow down a project or cause our team to lose a promotion.

[17:10] We might fear that if we stop indulging in certain obstacles, our family members may go without things that they want.

And so we don't remove the obstacle. And it slows our pursuit of Jesus. Others of us simply like the promises that the obstacle might make to us.

We assume that the obstacle will give us security or acceptance. We assume that the obstacle will provide us with quick medication for our pain.

Others assume that the obstacle will give us a quicker route to some goal. And so we put our hope in the false promises that are made by the obstacle.

And so we don't remove the obstacle. And it slows our pursuit of Jesus. But brothers and sisters, I want you to listen closely.

[18:15] None of these obstacles offer to you what Jesus offers. You know this. I know this.

And yet we still give in to the obstacles. So friends, let me promise you something important this morning. The gospel enables you to remove the obstacles.

How does it do this? We may love the obstacle, but the gospel shows us that nothing exceeds God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

And the gospel shows us that we can find no greater satisfaction than the satisfaction that is found in him. I love Matthew 13, verse 44.

It says this. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. Which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

[19 : 23] That's what it's like to know the gospel. Once you taste and see that the Lord is good, you will sacrifice anything and everything to taste more of it.

But unlike the obstacles, sacrificing everything for Jesus won't cause us dissatisfaction.

It won't produce shame. It won't leave us lonely and sad and guilty. It will satisfy us.

Notice what I said in Matthew 13, verse 44. That in his joy, the man sold everything he had.

The key to overcoming our love for obstacles is finding and knowing the soul-satisfying gospel of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, we may think that we need the obstacle, but we truly need nothing other than Jesus.

[20 : 33] I'm reminded of Pastor John Piper's question in his book, God is the gospel. When he asks, Could you be satisfied with heaven if Christ were not there?

I hope we would all say no. We would not be satisfied without Christ. Brothers and sisters, if we reached heaven and for eternity had nothing else than to experience the presence and the love of Jesus and to gaze upon his beauty for eternity, we would have infinitely more than anything that we could ever think that we need.

Pastor Ray Ortlund conveys the same truth when he says this, The worst this life can shove down our throats, but with the nearness of Jesus, is heaven on earth.

The best this life can give, but without Jesus, is a living hell. We may think that the obstacles offer us wonderful promises, but nothing compares to the promises of God in the gospel.

Because only Jesus died on the cross for sin. So only Jesus can give you the forgiveness, the restoration, and the hope that you so desire.

[22 : 42] Because only Jesus has risen from the dead. Only Jesus can offer you eternal life.

Because of the gospel, no promises compare to the promises of God in Jesus.

And in a world where obstacles seek to distract and entangle us, we must look to Jesus.

Friends, the reason we joyfully remove the obstacles is so that we can pursue Jesus. Let's look at the second part of verse 1, and then at verse 2.

And let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Christians should pursue after Jesus, our perfect example of faith. Christians must run the race that lies before us.

[24 : 02] But while we do, we fix our eyes on Jesus. I love that wording, fix our eyes. Some translations smooth that out and just say, look at Jesus.

But I love that. I love that. Fix our eyes. Jesus is here called the founder or the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

Jesus has provided the perfect example for us. He faced intense suffering, but did so in pursuit of joy, who for the joy set before him endured the cross.

He faced the powers of sin and death, yet looked toward his exaltation. He now reigns victorious over both sin and death as our exalted king, seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

He sets an example for us to have faith in future promises so that we can endure suffering now.

Through his life, death, and resurrection as the perfecter of our faith, he provides everything we need from start to finish so that we can run this race with joy.

[25 : 27] Notice in verse 2 how the author emphasizes that Jesus' exaltation came through suffering. He focuses on two aspects of suffering.

First, he notes his endurance of the cross. Jesus faced a brutal physical death at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus endured the intensity of the Father's punishment against sin in his body. And according to our passage, he could endure it because of the joy that he pursued.

Second, the author notes that Jesus disregarded, or maybe your translation says despised, the shame.

People would ridicule and mock criminals who were hung to die on a cross. The gospels recount how people mocked Jesus as his naked body hung bloodied and frail on the cross.

[26 : 40] Yet our passage this morning teaches us that Jesus disregarded the shame. In the words of one scholar, Jesus totally disregarded the shame and in no way allowed it to divert him from perfect obedience.

In his pursuit of joy, found in obedience to the Father, Jesus willingly endured grotesque suffering and disregarded the shame that was cast upon him.

Following Jesus, let us pursue joy in God, regardless of our situation.

Jesus pursued the joy of his Father, but we pursue the joy of the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit. We look back to the flawed but faithful examples of faith in Hebrews 11, who for the joy set before them, looked to the heavenly city, found satisfaction in divine promises, and were able to face torture, imprisonment, stoning, and mockery.

Those who now provide a great crowd of spectators for the race that we are called to run. They're cheering us on as examples of those who pursued joy in God despite their current situations.

[28 : 15] And so we look ahead in the race to Jesus, the pace setter, who has set the perfect example and shown us how to set our hope in future joy so that we can endure now.

When I ran that previously mentioned marathon back in December of 2016, the final 10K was brutal.

It was cold, and it was exceptionally windy on that day. There were wind gusts up to 40 kilometers per hour, and for the final 10K, those winds were coming directly at us.

As I ran those final kilometers, people were dropping to the ground all around me. Medical trucks were rushing out to aid runners who were falling to the ground.

It ached. The wind made it so hard, and it would have been so easy to get distracted by those who were falling to the ground around me.

[29 : 27] But what was it that got me to the end? I thought about seeing my family at the finish line. I kept thinking about the joy of completing the race.

I kept thinking about how pressing on as hard and as fast as I could was worth it. That future joy made the current struggle worth it.

Brothers and sisters, for the joy that is to be found in Jesus, we can do whatever it takes to pursue him. Because of the gospel, we can do everything necessary to pursue him.

We can press on, because we know that if we face suffering now, Jesus has already defeated sin and death on the cross.

And so our suffering is at most temporary. There is a future joy and a future grace to be found through obedience.

[30 : 41] So what does this look like in our daily lives? Let me give two examples. When faced with the question of whether to compromise our morals and help the team achieve its targets faster or even surpass its targets, we can say no.

You know you will face shame and rejection for not doing what everyone else is doing whenever they compromise their morals. You know you might receive rejection and suffering for not doing what everyone else on the team is doing.

But you can remember that Jesus despised the shame and looked forward to a greater joy on the other side of suffering. So can you.

It will be hard. But you can remove the obstacles and by God's grace pursue Jesus. When you sit in front of your computer or open your phone and are faced with the temptation of going to sites that you know dishonored Jesus or playing a few more hours of a game that has become an addiction or watching another movie as an escape from dealing with your real world relationships, then you can stop, take a breath, and remember that these are obstacles in your pursuit of Jesus.

You can remember that Jesus died on the cross for your sin and so you can set aside any obstacle. You can remember that joy and satisfaction in obedience to Jesus far surpass whatever dopamine hit or escape these obstacles might provide.

[32 : 51] It will be hard, but you can remove the obstacles and by God's grace pursue Jesus.

So in conclusion, we can face shame because we know that Jesus disregarded the shame and now reigns as King of Kings in the highest place of honor.

We can remove any obstacles because the fullness of God's grace and joy and delight in him lies before us. The beauty of Jesus lies ahead of us.

Complete joy and satisfaction are promised to us. So let us fix our eyes on Jesus and run forward in faith, pursuing after him.

Let's pray. Jesus, I'm so humbled by the example that is presented in this passage.

[34 : 00] Father, thank you for preserving these words. Thank you for reminding us that our life is a race. This is a race of faith.

We have to train. We have to work hard. We have to set aside sacrifices, obstacles, obstacles, and the sin that clings so closely. Sins that sometimes we love, think we need, enjoy the promises of, or just want to indulge in.

But we know, as we fix our eyes on you, that removing the obstacles and getting rid of the sin is worth it because you have set the pace for us.

You have shown us how for the joy set before you, you endured the cross. And so we can take up our cross and follow after you, knowing that because of your victory over sin and death, there is hope, there is grace, there is joy, there is satisfaction and acceptance and forgiveness and life that is only found in you that will satisfy us more than anything else could possibly satisfy us.

So I pray, God, that as we finish up this camp and as we go back to our various responsibilities and lives and distractions and everything else, Father, I pray that we cannot stop setting our eyes on you, fixing our eyes on you, and running forward in this race that you have put us on.

[35 : 49] Father, help remind each and every one of us of these two verses in the weeks to come. Keep them on our minds, keep them in our hearts so that we can remember that we can remove the obstacles and anything that hinders us from running the race and we can pursue after you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.