

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Slide – Welcome Announcements

Prayer

Worship

Greeting – Good morning, everyone. I was originally planning to share this message the Sunday before Martin Luther King Day, and I thought it would be appropriate to connect my message with him. But due to unforeseen circumstances, I didn't get to deliver the message to you that day. So, when Pastor Brian asked me if I'd like to share a message with you this morning, I thought I'd have to change the message quite a bit. But as it turns out, the message I intended to share that day is still just as relevant as it would have been two weeks ago.

I've entitled this message – **The Race Before Us**

I'd like to start by sharing with you the last couple of minutes of the last speech Dr. King ever gave.

Slide – Mountaintop Speech Audio Over Photo

After audio finishes playing...

Just a few hours later, this man of God lay dead – the victim of an assassin's bullet. How typical of a “wicked and adulterous people” who loudly proclaim that we honor and respect men of peace, yet repeatedly murder them because we don't like hearing what they have been given by God to say to us. The words of Jesus to the Jewish leaders of His day spring to mind.

Slides – Matthew 23:34-35

34Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Matthew 23:34-35 [ESV]

What struck me the most about Dr. King's “Mountaintop” speech though was his simple statement, “I just want to do the will of God.” Doing the will of God is – or should be – the earnest desire of every Christian. But how do we go about that? A dear sister in Christ asked me one Friday night on the way home from Bible study, how she could know whether she was doing the will of God. That was an excellent question. After some reflection though, it occurred to me that we really have no other choice. God is our sovereign LORD. His will reigns supreme over all creation including you and me. In short, God's will shall be done. The question is how we can take part in the fulfillment of God's will in and through us.

To be effective as God's servants requires two things...

1. Learning God's will for us.
2. Obedience to God's calling and leading.

Learning God's will for us – The lesson last Sunday evening in our current “One At a Time” discipleship series pointed out that we must first seek to learn what God wishes to do **in** us before we can truly discover what God wishes to do **through** us. We accomplish this through diligent and

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

honest prayer, through study of God’s Word, and through the fellowship of like-minded Christ followers who are on the journey with us to discover God’s will for our lives.

This discernment of God’s will is an ongoing and continual process each and every moment of each and every day. In a very real sense, we will never reach the finish line of The Race That’s Set Before Us until that glorious day when God calls us home to Him or returns to gather His Church as His bride.

Obedience – Then having discovered God’s will for us, we must first allow God’s Spirit to work the required changes in our hearts, and then we must determine to obey His calling and His leading for the work He wishes to accomplish through us. This too is an ongoing process to which we ourselves must commit ourselves each morning.

But how do we even begin? Surprisingly, that part is pretty simple.

I thought it would be appropriate to start out answering that question with one of my favorite “quotes” from Martin Luther King, Jr. As it turns out, this quote that’s frequently attributed to him has never been found in any of his writings or recorded speeches. But regardless of whoever actually first said it, this admonition is still very appropriate to what we’ll be talking about today.

Slide – Disappearing Staircase

This year at Mt. Freedom, we’re hoping to re-focus and re-energize our commitment to our church mission, and core values – particularly with regard to Kingdom work in our community and especially in a renewed focus on both individual and corporate prayer as a central part of our daily lives.

One of the new initiatives that we’ve started is setting aside an hour each Tuesday morning when we gather here in the sanctuary to pray together. I strongly encourage you to join us Tuesdays between 10 AM and 11 AM. Our hope with this initiative is to reinvigorate our church’s emphasis on one of the key aspects of our Christian lives – seeking the LORD together in prayer – prayer for our mission, prayer for our community, and prayer for our individual members. Along with that prayer time here in the sanctuary, we will be creating a “prayer wall” where folks can post prayer requests. We’ll be referring to the prayer wall to guide our prayers during our Tuesday morning prayer time.

Eventually God willing, we will be creating a virtual prayer wall on our church website and mobile app to help us focus, guide, and track our individual and corporate prayers throughout the days and weeks of our church lives.

Over the last few weeks, we have also been taking a critical look at ourselves both individually and as a fellowship of believers. We want to determine whether we actually are who we say we are in our mission statement and core values, or whether we need to make changes in the way we approach our work within the community, and more importantly how we approach our relationship with the one true and living God.

Before I go on, I need to make sure you all understand that I am preaching just as much and more about myself than about anyone else. I hope, if you pay strict attention, you’ll hear me talk about **me** and **we**, not about **you** and **them**. All of us have a lot of room for improvement in how well we focus and attune our lives to the Living God at the very center of our being.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Sir Isaac Newton is famous for formulating three Laws of Motion. The first of these is sometimes known as the law of inertia.

Slide – Newton’s 1st Law

People are much the same as the inanimate objects that Newton wrote about. We are resistant to change even though we know that change is inevitable, because we fear the unknown. We don’t want to let our family and friends or our God down. We doubt that we will be able to meet the new challenge, forgetting that it is our unchanging, all-knowing, all-powerful God who leads us, and that His plans for us are **always** in our best interests if we will only allow Him to lead us.

Newton’s law of inertia most certainly applies to human beings not only in secular society, but also in the Church of Jesus Christ as much as in any group of people. If we’re not moving in the work of God’s Kingdom it would take dynamite to blast us out of our complacency, and even if we **are** going about the motions of God’s work, we often continue to do things the same way year-by-year even if those approaches to our Father’s business have repeatedly proven themselves ineffective. Sadly, we persist in our ways of either inaction or ineffective action despite the clear urging of God’s Spirit for us to do otherwise.

Yes. There are many resources that are lacking in this world and Church of ours, but inertia is not one of them. As my dear wife Sue put it last week, “Getting people motivated is like trying to get the Slinky to go back up the stairs.” But being stuck in a hole or in a rut is not what God has in mind for us. He calls us to change, to stretch, and to grow in the service of His Kingdom, and to continually draw closer and closer in our personal relationship with Him day-by-day and year-by-year until He either calls us to Himself or returns to gather His church as His bride.

So, what is the Force that can overcome our natural tendency of inertia? It is none other than God’s Holy Spirit dwelling and working within us. He has the power to pull us out of our complacency, and to change the direction we are moving if it is not the best one for the fulfillment of God’s purposes in our lives. Oftentimes, only God recognizes when our spiritual relationship with Him has stagnated, and God alone is aware when the path we are on is misleading us. Yes. God alone has the power to lead us in the paths of righteousness and service to His Kingdom, but we must allow Him to do that.

When we confess Jesus as our LORD, and receive from Him the gift of eternal life through that profession of faith and through heartfelt belief in Jesus’ resurrection, He revives our spirits by the indwelling of His own Spirit within us, and begins His work of perfecting us into the very image of Jesus – God the Son. But our profession of His lordship must be true and without reservation. He must truly **be** our chosen king, and LORD. If our faith and profession of His lordship is genuine, we empower His Spirit dwelling within us to work the changes in our lives and our hearts that are needed to overcome our inertia and make us His implements in establishing His everlasting Kingdom to His eternal glory.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Jesus Himself taught us what He expects of us in His final words before He ascended back to His Father.

Slides – Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20 [ESV]

So, assuming we have the desire to serve our Lord and to draw closer to Him as we say in our Mission Statement and Core Values, how do we go about making the changes He desires in us? How do we step out in faith even though we can't see the entire staircase?

Take the First Step in Faith

As our framework for answering those vital questions, if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to one of my favorite passages in all of God's Word – Hebrews chapter 12. Most of our Scripture references will be up on the screen as well.

Slides – Hebrews 12:1-2

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, 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. Hebrews 12:1-2 [ESV]

The witnesses to whom Paul (presumed author of Hebrews) refers here are the ones he has just finished writing about in Hebrews 11 – his great treatise on faith.

Paul begins Hebrews 11 with a succinct definition of faith.

Slide – Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1 [ESV]

If we are to truly take that first step in the service of God's Kingdom without being able to see completely where God is leading us, we must do so with the true assurance of the Heavenly promise we have received by faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We must be fully convinced that although we cannot yet see the fulfillment of His promise, we can rest confidently in it.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Paul goes on to say that without such faith it is impossible to please God or to draw near to Him as we desire.

Slide – Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Hebrews 11:6 [ESV]

Indeed, it is by such faith that we have inherited eternal life as God's children as Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8. And with that amazing gift of salvation by faith, God also gives us His Spirit dwelling inside us by Whom we receive the power and desire to draw near to Him and labor in His service.

Slide – Philippians 2:13

for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.
Philippians 2:13 [ESV]

Indeed, it is God's Spirit Himself who gives us the desire to serve and draw near to Him, and then empowers us to do so.

We need to ask ourselves, **“Do we have the necessary fundamental faith in the power of God's Spirit working within us to overcome our fears and our inherent character of inertia, and take that first step along the staircase that God has laid before us?”**

Let Us Also Lay Aside Every Weight

Let's look again at Hebrews 12:1

Slide – Hebrews 12:1 Every Weight

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, Hebrews 12:1 [ESV]

Look. Believe me. I get it. We're busy. We're so busy in fact that the “busy-ness” in our lives frequently distracts us from being about our Father's business. I freely admit that I'm personally not nearly as busy as most of you, my brothers and sisters. My children are grown and have their own busy lives far from my home. My career in the information technology business is over (at least the **paying** part). And my wife is busy enough for both of us. But nevertheless, I do get it. There are only so many hours in a day, and they get filled up with so many other things – family, work, school, social commitments. Dare I say it – social media, video games, watching TV, hobbies, outdoor recreation. Our devotion to our God and to His service oftentimes falls by the wayside. We are like the seed that fell among the thorns in Jesus' Parable of the Sower.

Slide – Luke 8:14

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

“And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.” Luke 8:14 [ESV]

But this gets back to that whole idea of our commitment to the lordship of Jesus over our lives. Devotion to our relationship with Him, and our service to Him need to be the very central focus of our entire being every minute of every day. Instead of worldly busy-ness distracting us from Him, He should be distracting us from worldly busy-ness. If we allow our relationship with Him to be our everything, our service for His Kingdom and all of that other earthly business will miraculously fall into line because He knows what we need. He has come to give us life and life more abundantly.

And Sin Which Clings So Closely

Let's look again at Hebrews 12:1

Slide – Hebrews 12:1 Sin Which Clings

¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, Hebrews 12:1 [ESV]

Those who know my testimony are aware that I ran from the LORD for many years after I became a believer in His Gospel before I finally made the commitment to declare Him as my LORD. I didn't want to make that commitment because I knew that in doing so, I would have to leave behind a besetting sin in which I had been embroiled all my adolescent and adult life – a sin that had become the central focus of my life entirely displacing my relationship with my Savior. In fact, to this very day I don't know whether or not I was actually saved during those years of running. Praise God, I will never have to know.

I can personally attest that our besetting sin can not only distract us from our relationship with our Lord Jesus, it can totally destroy our witness of His Gospel.

Thus, Paul wrote to the Romans...

Slides – Romans 2:21-24

²¹you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²²You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. ²⁴For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” Romans 2:21-24 [ESV]

But if we truly repent of our sin and commit to struggle against it by the power of God's Spirit within us, even our former sin can become a powerful aspect of our Gospel witness. Our shame and sorrow can be turned to joy in the realization that He loves us so much He was willing to die in our place to rescue us out of our sin. That realization empowers us to proclaim joyfully His offer of salvation to **all** who would believe on His Name and be cleansed of sin just as we were.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

We must not let our shame over our past prevent us from proclaiming joyfully to others who may still be embroiled in those same sins that Jesus is willing and able to rescue us out of them and lead us onto the path of righteousness if we are only willing to believe in His Gospel and submit to His lordship as we did.

Run With Endurance

Continuing now in Hebrews 12:1...

Slide – Hebrews 12:1 – Run with Endurance

*¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and **let us run with endurance** the race that is set before us,* Hebrews 12:1 [ESV]

This life of devotion to our relationship with God and to Christian service in His holy Name is not going to be all rainbows, lollipops, and unicorns. Yes. Sometimes there will be mountaintop moments like the one Martin Luther King described on the day he was killed. Indeed, now and again when we truly need His encouragement, God will show us a glimpse of the glory of His coming and remind us of the certainty of His soon return. But at other times He will guide us into and through the valley of the shadow of death.

This should not surprise us or dishearten us.

Slides – 1 Peter 4:12-14

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 1 Peter 4:12-14 [ESV]

The Race That Is Set Before Us

Continuing now in Hebrews 12:1...

Slide – Hebrews 12:1 – The Race That Is Set Before Us

*¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance **the race that is set before us,*** Hebrews 12:1 [ESV]

In His model prayer (Matthew 6:5–13), Jesus admonishes us to pray that God's will be done here on Earth just as it is done in Heaven. But if we're really honest, when it comes to our Kingdom service,

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

we would really rather be able to set the agenda ourselves at least partially rather than fully submitting to God's will for us.

Video – Don't Send Me to Africa

Ephesians 2:10 tells us that God has foreordained the works He has prepared for us since before He created us. He then empowers us to accomplish those foreordained works through the spiritual gifts He has ordained specifically for each of us.

Let's take a quick look at one of the lists of these gifts given to us in God's Word.

Slides – 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. ¹¹

Corinthians 12:4-11 [ESV]

Paul goes on later in the chapter to encourage us to diligently seek spiritual gifts in prayer, particularly the gift of prophecy – the ability to speak God's Word in the power of His Spirit. The implication here is that the gifts with which God endows us may change over time to fit His perfect purposes for us on any given day. God knows us intimately. Thus, He is fully aware that we neither need nor can we handle the full complement of gifts He has in store for us all the time.

For example, I don't personally believe that God grants a singular gift of healing to any particular individual in perpetuity. If that were so, and if the chosen person is obedient to God's calling, it would stand to reason that there wouldn't ever be anyone sick or wounded because the chosen one would have healed them. No. Instead God gives this gift at specific times and places to specific people for His own glorification in that moment.

So it is with all of our gifts. They are granted by God for His own purposes which may not be altogether apparent to those whom God uses. Our part is to seek out His gifts, to pray for His leading in the use of our gifts, and to be obedient to His calling even and especially when our own expectations and desires about His purposes for us don't line up with His clear guidance. We must not only be willing to ask the question about our gifts, we must also be willing to accept and obey His answer even if He tells us He wants to send us to Africa!

As Paul puts it in Hebrews 12:1, we must run the race that is set before us and stay within the bounds of the racetrack that God has laid before us. Otherwise, the application of our gifts will be ineffective at best, and God might even choose to remove those gifts from us and bestow them elsewhere like a judge at a race who disqualifies runners if they go outside their lanes.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Put simply, we must learn to listen and obey, knowing by faith that God's answer is always yes and amen.

Before we move on, it is important to point out that we need to avoid the danger of coveting another's gifts and calling. Paul talks extensively about this in his comparison of the Church to a physical body later in 1 Corinthians 12. Nor should those whom God might have granted the more spectacular gifts – like speaking in tongues or healing – succumb to the temptation to think of our gifts as being more important than others' or ourselves as somehow more deserving of them than our brothers and sisters with less spectacular gifts. Above all, we must remember that these are gifts of God and nothing of our own. Our spiritual gifts are just that – **gifts** – essentially on loan to us for God's own purposes of which He alone is fully aware.

The apostle James put this idea best...

Slide – James 1:17

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17 [ESV]

Looking to Jesus

Continuing now in Hebrews 12:2

Slide – Hebrews 12:2 – Looking to Jesus

looking to Jesus, *the founder and perfecter of our faith, 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.* Hebrews 12:2 [ESV]

So far, all of the aspects we have examined form a rather daunting prospect for us if we desire to truly fulfill Jesus' Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. But Paul gives us great reassurance in Hebrews 12:2. Jesus Himself is the perfect example of one who accomplished the God-given mission set before Him. Surely, even if God calls on us to offer up our very lives in His service, it is nothing compared to the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross taking the righteous wrath of God for all the sins of all the people of all time upon Himself, especially since He Himself knew no sin. Thus Jesus, Himself is the example we must look to in fulfilling our God-given mission just as Paul says here in Hebrews 12:2.

Furthermore, Jesus reassures us that we will never be alone in the effort, saying that He will always be with us through it all. We have the surety of His Spirit dwelling with in us, empowering us to finish the race that He has set before us. In fact, it is only by the power of His Spirit that we can accomplish anything at all for the Kingdom of God.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Slide – Hebrews 12:2 – The Founder and Perfecter

²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, 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. Hebrews 12:2 [ESV]

Not only does God's Spirit within us, empower us to accomplish the work He has set before us, He is also working in us the changes needed to perfect us into the very image of Jesus. Obviously, this is an ongoing work of God's Spirit that will not be completed until Jesus calls us to His side at our bodily death, or He returns as He has promised to gather His Church to Himself as His bride.

Once more though, we need to remind ourselves that God's Spirit can only accomplish these things within us and through us if we allow Him. We must allow Him to change us, and we must obey His leading.

Slide – Hebrews 12:2 – The Joy Set Before Him

²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, 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. Hebrews 12:2 [ESV]

Someone here is almost certainly thinking, "**God would never use me.** Nobody else knows all the horrible things I've done, but God does. What if someone rejects my testimony because they know about my past? That might ruin someone's chance of being saved forever."

I'm here to tell you straight up – **That's a lie straight from the pit of Hell.** It's one of the oldest tricks in our enemy's bag. He can't refute our testimony, but he *can* make us too ashamed to share it. Hebrews 12:2 tells us something different. Paul tells us that Jesus went to the cross willingly because of the joy that was set before Him – the joy of bringing otherwise hopeless sinners like you and me to repentance and salvation. Our hearts offered up to Him in faith are the joy that was set before Him.

Maybe someone here is thinking, "**My testimony is nothing spectacular.** Jesus didn't rescue me out of some horrendously sinful and destructive lifestyle. He didn't restore my life after I was critically injured. Lots of people have more dramatic and noteworthy testimonies than I have. Let *them* go out and share. No one would want to listen to how I was saved."

This is another lie – one we tell ourselves out of fear our testimony will be rejected. We don't want to put our hearts out for someone to wound us. It's much safer to just remain quiet and unobtrusive. But God's Word tells us that even the angels in Heaven rejoice when one sinner like you and me is saved. Furthermore, regardless of what we might see as the blandness of our testimony, our story of salvation remains our own. God chose to save us out of death in our sin in the perfect manner that He Himself ordained. Furthermore, our personal testimony can never be refuted by anyone as long as we ourselves believe it.

If someone rejects and disbelieves our testimony, we mustn't take that personally. We need to cast our minds back to those times when someone shared the Gospel with us and we rejected it because the time wasn't yet right for us to believe the Gospel, turn from our sin, and be saved. Furthermore, we must remember that Jesus Himself was rejected almost entirely by His own people to whom He had been sent as the promised Messiah they are still awaiting. Jesus didn't call upon us in His Great Commission to convince people of the Gospel Truth, but simply to share the things that He has taught us. It is God's Spirit who convicts people of the Truth that they might be saved.

The Race Before Us – Hebrews 12:1-2 Mt. Freedom Baptist Church 1/29/2023

Finally, someone might be saying to themselves, **“I’m not qualified for any kind of service. I’m not very familiar with the Scripture, or theological doctrine. What if I tell someone something wrong?”** Remember that we are never alone. Jesus promises that He is with us always through every endeavor to which He calls us. He will not allow His Word to return without effect. He promises that His Word will always accomplish the purpose for which He sent it forth.

The well-worn Christianese saying is nevertheless true despite its high mileage – **God doesn’t call the qualified, He qualifies the called.** If He has sent us to proclaim His Word, then we can rest assured that His own power is behind our witness. There is no such thing as an insignificant witness. Let me close with this message from the Billy Graham Evangelical Association.

Video – Insignificant Witness

Invitation

Closing Prayer and Announcements