

LEAD ON

KEEPING RUNNING AS LEADERS

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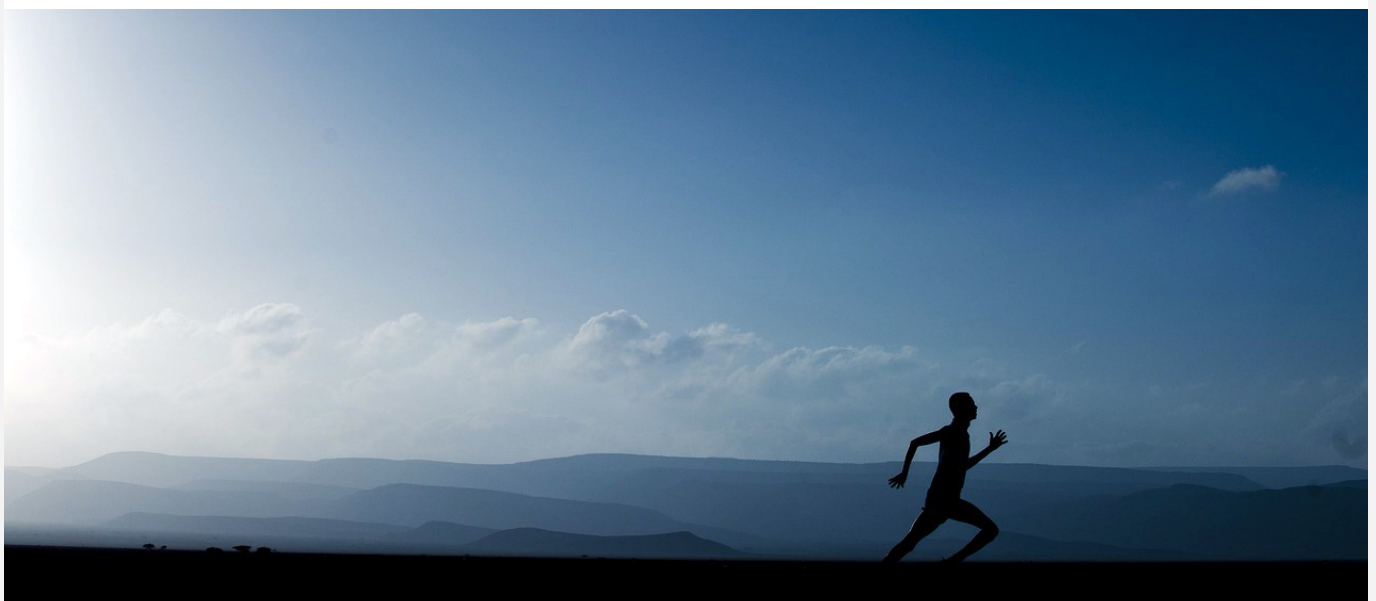
HEBREWS 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The opening verses of Hebrews 12 have been really important to me through many years of ministry. They have offered the opportunity to pause and reflect on my own spiritual journey, and to think through some profound questions about my leadership and my interaction with those I lead and serve.

Together we will consider each verse with some areas to consider for our own lives but also in the context of the places we are called to lead and minister. It might be an exercise to use on a personal retreat day or spread over several weeks as you slowly take time to respond to the challenges of each of these verses, maybe with your journal to hand.

As we begin may we be still and invite God to lead us as the Holy Spirit nudges us, helping us to be more fully the leaders he wants us to be.



VERSE 1: THEREFORE, SINCE WE ARE SURROUNDED BY SUCH A GREAT CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Hebrews 12 opens by taking the reader back into Hebrews 11 where the writer has highlighted the faith of familiar many people from the Old Testament, inspiring us as we think about them. Their witness offers us both hope and an example. Their presence in these verses is an invitation to us, not to be alone in our leadership, but to be encouraged and helped by others. This might include our study of people in the Bible and Christians in history, and it may also include those who cheer us on today.

- Who is inspiring you to spiritual growth, to faithfulness, to righteousness?
- And as leaders who are you investing in and encouraging?

VERSE 1: LET US THROW OFF EVERYTHING THAT HINDERS

As I have studied and reflected on these words, I have found it helpful to differentiate between hindrance and sin. Hindrances may sometimes seem like good ideas but can actually slow or pause our progress. They may be the heavy burdens which Jesus invites us to lay down so we might find rest. They maybe bad habits which prevent us from being fully the people God has ordained us to be. The language of the passage is clear – we are to throw off everything that hinders. Too often

we live with hindrance, it becomes familiar, it is ‘just how it is’, but this verse encourages us to address these issues.

For a number of churches the return from Covid closures was a pruning of longer-term hindrances such as activities which previously had been hard to close. Where might pruning be needed today so we are more fruitful?

- What is hindering you, your leadership or your church? What could change?

VERSE 1: LET US THROW OFF THE SIN THAT SO EASILY ENTANGLES.

Using Psalm 139 we may often invite God to ‘search our hearts’. Sometimes our sin is obvious to us, sometimes we need to ask God to show us. Whether in our personal lives or in our leadership, sin will undermine or dilute all that we seek to do with God. The language of Hebrews 12 is very clear – in confessing our sin we are throwing it off.

- Ask God to search you and show you any sin that needs to be confessed and thrown off. Think about your life as a Christian disciple. Your life as a Christian leader. And think is their sin affecting the church you lead?



VERSE 1: AND LET US RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE

When I started studying these verses in detail more than 25 years ago I was not a runner. More recently seven years of regular running have taught me a lot about perseverance and keeping going. Is God encouraging you to keep going where it has got tough, where you are tired or discouraged or progress has been slow? Sometimes it is right to stop things but there are also times when we need to choose to persevere.

- In what areas of life or ministry have you felt like giving up? What would persevering look like in those situations?

VERSE 1: THE RACE MARKED OUT FOR US

Amongst my running friends and my family, I have a reputation for accidentally going the wrong way and getting lost! In this passage we are encouraged to discover the race that God has marked out for us. We should be looking for both the nearby signposts, reassuring us that we are in the right place, and also asking God for clues about his direction a bit further ahead so that we can plan. Don't forget that God's signs are not only directional but may also indicate pace or challenges.

- Are you confident that you are on the right path? Are you asking God to reveal his markers for you personally and for those you lead?

VERSE 2: FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS

There is something very powerful about choosing to fix our eyes on Jesus. When we see Jesus we see him for all that he is – the one who left heaven and dwelt among us, who taught and performed miracles, who died for us, rose again and now sits at the right hand of the Father, the one who is the way, the truth and the life. As we gaze upon Jesus, we see him fully for who he is, we choose to give him our full and undivided attention and, as we do that, we see favour and affirmation towards us in his eyes looking back.

- In the fullness and busyness of life, how much attention are you giving Jesus? How do you ensure that in the teams you lead you take time to seek Jesus, fixing their eyes on him. Are you praying, listening, looking?

VERSE 2: THE PIONEER AND PERFECTOR OF FAITH

It is very reassuring to remember that responsibility for our faith story rests with Jesus and not with us – he pioneers and he perfects. It is all about him and yet so easily we make it all about us. For those who by personality or because of pressure from others take responsibility and activity seriously it is important to pause and acknowledge that the pioneer and perfecter of faith comes first and not us. We must allow him to lead and share the load and not to see it as just all about us and our input.



- As you examine yourself, are you allowing Jesus to perfect you or are you striving alone?
- If someone sat in on your leadership team meeting or PCC meeting, would they sense a culture in which Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of your faith?

VERSE 2: FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM HE ENDURED THE CROSS, SCORNING ITS SHAME, AND SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD.

In the concluding section of these verses we are strongly encouraged to remember Jesus' response to the journey towards the cross. There is something very powerful in this imagery. We see Jesus' joy as his destiny is accomplished through the cross, through shame and finally in victory as he is restored at God's right hand. As we rejoice in Jesus so might we hold his example of joy in the midst of obedience even when it takes us to some tough places.

- Where in life or ministry might it be helpful for me to reflect on Jesus' relationship with joy, obedience and struggle?

VERSE 3: CONSIDER HIM WHO ENDURED SUCH OPPOSITION FROM SINNERS, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT GROW WEARY AND LOSE HEART.

I imagine that we all know life and particularly leadership can carry challenges, not least from other people. Sometimes we need to have the humility to pay attention to opposition because we are heading in the

wrong direction. Jesus clearly knew he was on the right path and so it is important that, like him, we do not find ourselves wearied or discouraged by opposition. We might want to think about strategies whether through prayer or appropriate accountability, which will help us to reflect Jesus' example of endurance.

- If the going is tough for you at the moment because of issues of opposition, how might you find fresh reserves of Godly endurance to help you?

I recently ran my toughest half marathon which included more than 300m of climb in the first five miles. The crowds were amazing, particularly on the uphills, and I really felt encouraged. I was running for charity and was definitely hindered by the banana costume I was wearing – throwing it off would have been a great relief! I was grateful for marshalls who showed the way – apparently there once was a half marathon where the markers were wrong and runners didn't complete the distance.

So many practical and spiritual life and leadership lessons are included in these verses – may we learn from them. I don't know how your spiritual leadership journey is going but I hope these verses help you to be ready to run with perseverance the race marked out for you.

