2016 New Year’s Message

**LET US FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS**

Hebrews 12:1-13

Key Verse: 12:1b-2a

“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of faith.”

 Happy New Year! As we begin a new year, it’s good to think about how we can live our lives meaningfully, as God our Father intended. When we were born, we were given life, one precious life. And our life in this world, whether it’s long or short, is like a race. It has a start line and a finish line. It also has a challenge/obstacle course with many ups and downs. Certain courses are very tough to complete, so quite a few people cannot make it to the end. Moreover, like a race, life also has a judge. Our judge is Jesus Christ. And when our race is over, there will be an award ceremony in heaven. All of us as believers in Christ are created by God to be winners so that one-day we may receive the crown of victory and eternal life. For this reason, as he neared the end of his life, Apostle Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8) Let us think about how we can be winners of this race.

 Look at verse 1a. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.” The word “Therefore” brings us back to Hebrews Chapter 11, in which the author mentions the men and women who had run the race before us during Old Testament times. These men and women were winners not because they were smarter or more able than others or because of their favorable human condition and circumstances. They were the winners because they ran the race by faith in spite of their adverse situations. From time to time, we may feel lonely in the journey or the race of our faith, forgetting that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, who are cheering us on in heaven and shouting “Hello, guys, cheer up! You are not alone. We also have gone through all your struggles. The Lord is with you.” In verses 1-13, the author gives practical instructions as to how we are to run our race successfully.

 ***First, we should run light and with perseverance (1)*** Verse 1 b says, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” If we were serious about winning the race, we would make sure to run light, wearing only shorts and light running shoes. Can you imagine a runner wearing heavy boots or high-hills, a winter coat and a backpack? (Pic-1) We would do our best to get rid of anything that would hinder us from running fast and far (Pic-II). We don’t need to wear expensive necklaces, earrings or carry cell-phones if we want to win the race. Good runners also put themselves under a strict diet and have self-control in order to maintain their body and spirit in the best condition. Likewise, we need to run light in our Christian race.

 We should throw off unnecessary baggage. But it’s not easy to throw it off. For example, to the Jewish believers who grew up in legalism, what hindered them the most was the heavy burden of legalism. It wasn’t easy to shake off their old traditions and legalistic ways of life and views. Traditionally, sincere Jews had always felt the pressure to be perfect by doing things right based on the laws and regulations of their religion. They were hard working, but they didn’t have freedom. As they continued to carry such heavy burdens, they became weary and burdened and could not run far. Eventually, they would be burnt out and drop out of the race. Therefore it is absolutely crucial for us, as believers in Christ, to learn to live by the grace of God, not by our religious zeal and Christian legalism. Are you carrying the heavy burden of legalism? Throw it off now. Of course, it would not be easy. Apostle Paul warned early Christians by saying in Galatians 5:1, “If is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

 Besides legalism, there are many things that can hinder us from running the race of faith. Some people have a habit of watching TV or surfing the Internet instead of spending their time and energy more constructively. Certain things may not be necessarily considered as bad as sin, but still be a distraction to our race of faith. But if we are serious about winning the race, we should surely avoid certain things that distract us. In order to be winners of the race, we need to have self-control. Regarding this matter, Apostle Paul gives us insight by saying in 1 Corinthians 10:23, “‘I have the right to do anything’ you say – but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’ – but not everything is constructive.”

 Among all the burdens we carry, the heaviest burden is our sin. Look at verse 1b again. “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” The author said, “the sin that so easily entangles.” Here, we learn that one of the characteristics of sin is entanglement. To be entangled means to be ensnared, entrapped or to be enmeshed so that it’s hard to say “no” or draw the line. “The sin that so easily entangles.” Sin is hard to remove because like a leech, it preys on or clings to another, like lust, greed, hypocrisy, etc. Among all our sins, the sin of pride (Self glory seeking tendency) seems to be the hardest one to get rid of. Proverbs 16:18 states, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

 In a certain pond, there were two ducks and a frog. They were neighbors and the best of friends. They played together all day long during the summer time (pic-3). But as the cold winter drew near and the water dried up, the ducks realized they would have to move. This would be easy for them, but what about their friend the frog? Finally it was decided that they would transport their friend. They flew to another location, with a stick between them and with the frog hanging on from the stick by its mouth (pic-4). Just then, a farmer looked up and said to his wife, “What a great idea! I wonder who thought of that?” Proudly, the frog said, “I did!” Imagine what happened to the frog. The frog fell (pic-5). He learned the hard way that pride goes before a fall (Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations, page 1100, illus. #4824)

 How can we remove the sin that so easily entangles? It’s possible only through the blood of Jesus Christ by religious rituals and not through religious rituals. And we should repent. 1 John 1:8-9 states, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Hebrews 9:13-14 states,” The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” By applying the blood of Jesus, we can be cleansed and set free from the entanglement of our sins and we can run the race of our faith to the end.

 Look at verse 1c again. “… And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” In a short track race, speed is important. In a long distance race, perseverance is more important than speed. At the beginning of a race, everyone can run fast. But as they continue to run, they begin to face difficulties, and even feel like dying due to severe chest pains. The temptation to give up is very strong. Likewise, due to constant difficulties we also feel like giving up our life of faith. We are discouraged when we compare ourselves with others who seem to be doing much better. To overcome this kind of crisis, we need to persevere. The phrase, “the race marked out for us” also indicates that each of us has a unique race to run, marked out for us by God our Father and we don’t need to compare our situations with others.

 ***Second, we should fix our eyes on Jesus (2-4):*** Look at verse 2 again. “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.” In a race, a runner should know the right goal. We don’t run aimlessly, like Forest Gump. We run our race with a clear goal. What is the goal of our faith? The goal of faith is Jesus Christ, who the pioneer and perfecter of faith. What does it mean that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of faith? It means that Jesus is the source of our salvation. In other words, it means that Jesus is the one who initiated faith in us and would complete it (Phil. 1:6). So apart from Jesus, our life has no meaning and power. We need to abide in Jesus by fixing our eyes on him because if we take our eyes off Jesus, we begin to sink spiritually and easily get off-track.

 There are many things that can distract our attention and focus in the world, including our personal problems and family problems. But we should focus our attention to Jesus. While Jesus was with his disciples on earth, he tried to help them trust in him. One night, while Jesus was away from them, his disciples were trying to cross the lake and saw Jesus walking on the water toward them. And they were terrified. “It’s a ghost” they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Simon Peter, one of the Twelve, replied, “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” “Come,” Jesus said. Then Simon Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. It was amazing that Simon could walk on the water. But when he saw the waves of water blown by the strong wind, he was afraid. He looked at the waves and didn’t turn his eyes upon Jesus. As a result, he began to sink and cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “Why did you doubt?” (Mt. 14:22-33) Fixing our eyes on Jesus means that no matter what circumstances we may be in, we should always trust our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, who is sovereign over all things. Jesus is God who is above all things both in heaven and earth. He is trust worthy and is with us now and forever.

 We should fix our eyes on Jesus also because he is our perfect example. Look at verse 2b. “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.” This verse teaches us that Jesus’ way is the way of the cross. Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mt. 8:34) The cross is a symbol of great pain and shame. For anyone, shame is very unbearable. But the way of the cross is the way of ultimate victory and glory. Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame. Why? It’s for the joy set before him, beginning with his resurrection from death, glorification and eternal inheritance and reign. We, as Christians, look forward to what is similar to what Jesus anticipated. In this world, we suffer for a while, but we can also endure sufferings and hardships when we look forward to our heavenly reward, which is far beyond what we can achieve in this world.

 One of the most difficult things in the race is discouragement. When we are discouraged, we are not motivated to run the race. We quickly want to give up. And that was the case for the first century Jewish believers. When they were going through hardships, especially severe persecution, not knowing the meaning of their sufferings, they were discouraged. They grew weary and lost the desire to live by faith in Jesus. Once they were fervent believers in Christ. But now they lost their hearts because of discouragement. “Lack of motivation and discouragement.”

 Look at verses 3 and 4. “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.” We are not to be discouraged in any circumstance because we have the sure promise of the glorious resurrection and victory in and through Jesus Christ. We are called to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ who suffered, died on the cross and rose from the dead. And we have the hope of glorious resurrection. We don’t need to be afraid of losing anything because for to us, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil. 1:21). To gain what? When we die, our bodies turn to a handful of dust. But because of faith in Jesus we gain eternal life, the glorious resurrection body and the eternal inheritance in God’s kingdom. Do you think that there is any true value in our suffering in Christ? Yes! Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Ro. 8:18). We will not be disappointed. We will rejoice. If we are not truly motivated by this hope in Christ, we cannot run the race to the end.

 ***Third, we should endure hardship as God’s discipline and never doubt God’s love (5-11):*** In verses 5-11, the author elaborates on the meaning of suffering for Christians. One of the main reasons that the Jewish Christians were about to give up their faith was that they didn’t understand the meaning of their hardships and sufferings. Look at verses 5-6. “And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” These verses are a quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12. Most people tend to think that if God loves them, they should prosper and not suffer too much. So the prosperity gospel is very popular. But that’s not exactly what the Bible teaches. It teaches us that God disciplines His loving children. No one in the Bible was exempt from God’s discipline. God disciplined Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Job and King David. Through God’s loving discipline, these forefathers of our faith grew mature and became a source of blessing to others. In fact, according to verses 7-10, if God does not discipline us, we are not legitimate children, not true sons and daughters at all.

 In other words, God’s love is disciplinary love. When I was young, my dad used to help me learn patience by having me remain in a hot bathtub for more than 10-15 minutes. At first I didn’t like it. Then I got used to it and I learned how to endure and be patient. For it, I am thankful and respect my father. But often our human father’s discipline is not perfect. Sometimes, they discipline their children out of anger and selfish desire. But our heaven Father’s discipline is perfect. Look at verses 10-11. “They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

 So what should be our attitude toward God’s discipline? We should accept it as God’s deep love. In fact, suffering and hardship are God’s blessing in disguise because God’s discipline produces the harvest of righteousness and peace for us. We also notice that God’s discipline produces good fruit not for everyone but only for those who have been trained by it. It means that our attitude toward God’s discipline is important. If we reject God’s discipline by doubting God’s love, complaining or blaming others, we don’t bear good fruit. We may have to suffer much, but we may bear no fruit at all. We can say that we are trained spiritually when we acknowledge God’s sovereignty and love and humble ourselves before God. When we are trained by it, we can bear a harvest of righteousness and peace. It means that we can bear the characteristics of our Lord Jesus and have everlasting peace in all circumstances. We would be thankful, joyful and prayer always (1 Thes. 5:16-18).

 Let me close my sermon. Look at verses 12 and 13. “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” How can we strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees? How can we make level paths for our feet? How can we be healed? We need Jesus. He can heal, restore and strengthen us.

However, we are to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. We are to run with perseverance the race marked out for each of us. We are not to compare ourselves with others. The world we live in is becoming more difficult and challenging than ever. It’s easy for us to look at our surroundings and become disheartened. But we should stop looking at our difficulties, surroundings, and others. Instead, we should fix our eyes on Jesus who is the source of our salvation and is always with us. He is the sovereign over all and above all things. Jesus is our shield, the rock of our salvation and the greatest reward. So let us run with perseverance the race, marked out for us, fixing our eyes on him, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, this year! God bless you! Let us read the key verse one more time. “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”