

Don't Stop Running-State of the Church Address [Slide 1] Hebrews 12:1-3

Today I am providing the annual state of the church address for Hope Fellowship as well as looking at God's word for encouragement to keep pressing on. Let's talk about some of our efforts that center around the church mission, which is to make a difference in the Brazosport Community and in the world by winning, building and equipping disciples in Jesus Christ. Let's start by looking at our world efforts.

In May, Rickey Williams, Greg Welte and I traveled to Zambia to train pastors and church leaders in doctrines of salvation and apologetics directed toward Jehovah's witnesses. These pastors and church leaders came primarily from Zambia but there were a few from Kenya. We equipped them to better lead and teach their churches.

In the Summer Chase Dodge and Leslie Swirsky flew to Cambodia with the Threaded Leaf Project helping to oversee a high school group from Maury and Erica's church. They helped equip that team to do cross cultural ministry as well as encouraging the local believers.

In the Summer a number of Hope Fellowship families traveled to McAllen and assisted local missionaries with a five day club resulting in 20 children being saved. That was a winning and building ministry.

This Fall, Walt Crews led a team of his daughter Catherine, Travis Vandaveer, Daryl Beatty and Jonathan House to help train Bible School students in Nepal. That was an equipping ministry.

We supported four different mission trips from our church this last year making a difference in the world by winning, building, and equipping disciples for Jesus Christ.

In the Brazosport Community we continued our Adopt a School Ministry at TW OGG Elementary School by providing an after school values training course and by providing mentors for hand-selected students. We are in a process of evaluation over that ministry because although we have repeatedly been told by the staff and teachers that we are making a big difference in their school, we have not yet seen any children or adults become Christians through our direct efforts and we have not seen any families from Ogg show up and stay at the church. We are not going to be able to continue the High Values Club in its present form because we don't have a dependable animal person, so we will research the possibility of changing to a Good News Club. Pray for us in discerning the Lord's direction for TW Ogg.

We have partnered with a number of other local ministries to make a difference in the Brazosport Area. We continue to support the church plant, Crossover Community Church in Freeport both financially and with volunteer help. We provide volunteers for the River of Hope Ministry, the Kairos prison ministry, True to Life's Ministry, and Texas Port Ministries. We are going to sponsor our second True to Life Ministry education class at the beginning of February, as you already heard. In addition we have a number of members mentoring TTLM clients.

As I look inside the church, not only did our people contribute to the twenty children being saved in McAllen but also another 7 were saved through the prayers and ministry of our people in 2016. We praise the Lord for his great kindness in drawing those people into salvation.

Some of our people are involved in either couple's mentoring or mentoring of individuals. I'm leading another Top Gun men's discipleship group this year and will also lead another How to Communicate God's Word class this winter to equip people to more accurately and effectively communicate God's word. We hope to see more people involved in mentoring and discipling. If

you want to connect with someone for personal discipling, talk to Curtis Swisher who coordinates the mentoring efforts in our church. These are all efforts along with our ABF's and life groups to build and equip people in the faith.

There is just a lot of good stuff going on at our church. We are still on track for our three year effort to pay off the church mortgage and then search for a new Senior Pastor. We have paid off about 60% of the remaining mortgage in the last year and a half. We possibly could have our mortgage paid off by the end of this year. We've just implemented the two worship services, so we will see how that goes. We'll try it to at least September and then evaluate whether the two worship services have provided more avenues for people outside our church to become connected to our body.

We made some upgrades to our lobby and hope to do some remodeling in the sanctuary and lobby this year. The church is healthy, people care for one another, and we have remained faithful to God and his Word and his mission.

What are some of the challenges we face in this culture? The greater mobility and income of people and a lessening commitment to church attendance has caused the concept of regular attendance in America to be redefined from every Sunday to once or twice a month. Unfortunately we are seeing some of that pattern at Hope Fellowship where membership stays the same but attendance declines. That pattern is a threat to building Biblical community. It is a pattern the whole American church faces.

Another challenge for us has been the switch from one income to two income homes. It used to be with DOW as the major employer, that most of our families were one income families. A lot of that has changed so that many young families are now dual income families often from necessity, sometimes by choice. The effect on the church has been the loss of women volunteers that formed the backbone of many church ministries. Two income families have less energy and time to give to the church and I think we have felt that in our children's and women's ministries as well as in other ministries. Again, this pattern is not unique to our church, but it is another societal trend that works against building community.

Because people's discretionary time is more limited, church ministries and events need to provide greater value for people to come. People have a lot of choices and limited time. Gone are the days when you simply came because it was the church. People are always evaluating whether something is worth their time. That suggests we need to do fewer things as a church, but do them very well. I wish our culture was not the way it is, but that is the reality we face as we minister in this age.

What then does God have to say to us at the start of 2017? I believe his words in Hebrews 12:1-3 are a good beginning. I invite you to turn in your Bible to Hebrews 12:1-3. Hebrews is about three fourths of the way through the New Testament. Hebrews 12:1-3. Let's read those verses. Read. I've written down a main idea for this passage on your sermon outline. Knowing you're watched, run your race to finish, following the example of Jesus and focusing on him.

The Bible compares our Christian life to a race. We need to know what kind of race it is and how to run it. That is what we want to learn today. What is this race we're running and how do we run it?

[Slide 2] First, your race is unavoidable. The race is set before us. The Greek verb, translated as "set before" means to set before someone or to expose to public view. God has set before us our race. In other words, he has entered us into the race and set us down before the starting blocks. We can choose to embarrass ourselves and God by not attempting to run the race at all or by running the race in a sloppy manner, but we don't have a choice about being entered in the

race. That happened when you trusted in Jesus. Your name was written down in the lamb's book of running contestants.

To understand the context of these verses look back at Hebrews chapter 11. Chapter 11 describes all the great OT heroes who endured because they lived by faith.

The theme of endurance through faith is a key theme in these chapters. You don't choose whether you enter the race. You choose whether you endure to the race's end. God has set your race before you. He chooses what kind of race it is, how long it is, how rough it is, what kind of obstacles it holds. You choose to run the race and to endure to the end.

A Christian who gives up, who stops believing in Jesus, who turns their back on the Christian faith would be like a runner who stops running and sits down on his black asphalt lane while all the other athletes run to the finish line. What a sad sight that would be. Your race is unavoidable. Your only decision is how you will run it.

[Slide 3] Second, your race is public. Two clues tell us that. As I said earlier, the Greek verb translated "set before", has the connotation of expose to public view. That's the first clue. The second clue is in the whole racing metaphor especially in the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Most track meets are held in some sort of oval stadium, where the audience surrounds the runners. You really don't have races that are not public spectacles. Others watch us race. Certainly our fellow humans do. What about the great cloud of witnesses referred to in verse 1?

The great cloud of witnesses refers primarily to the people of faith mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11. The big question is are they witnesses to us or witnesses of us, because the word "witness" can be used either way. Are the people of faith in chapter 11 witnesses to us? In other words, do their lives recorded in Scripture act as a witness to us of how to live by faith? Certainly they do. Are they witnesses of us? Is the author of Hebrews suggesting that the saints who have already died are allowed a ringside seat to watch us live out our Christian life? Are they witnessing us run our race?

Most Bible commentators choose the first explanation and say that their examples are a witness to us. However, I think the Bible is actually making the point that we should run our race well because we are being watched by all those who lived before us. Think about how the racing metaphor plays out in verses 1-2. We are the runner. Where are our eyes supposed to be when we run the race? Are we supposed to be looking to those people of faith who have already run the race and left us an example? Keeping with the metaphor in verse 2 we are supposed to run the race by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, not on the saints who lived before us. The cloud of witnesses surrounding us recalls all the people in the stadium watching the runners. Sure, we can learn from the example of those who lived before us, but our motivation to run partially comes from the realization that they are in the stands cheering us on. I do believe Moses, Abraham, Ruth, David, Daniel are watching us, and that is one reason we should run well.

[Slide 4] The third reality of your race is that there is a trophy at the end. Hebrews 11:39-40 says this, "Read." The OT saints were promised something but they haven't received it yet. They won't receive it apart from us. The author alludes to it in verse 40, being made perfect. He is most likely referring to the resurrection of the body which all will receive at the very end when the last race is finished. We will then receive our resurrection bodies and will be perfect, complete, lacking in nothing. No one gets the trophy until everybody finishes the race.

[Slide 5] The fourth reality of your race is that your finish is guaranteed. This certainly is the result of salvation by grace, but in this passage the key indicator is that Jesus is described as both the author and the perfecter of faith. The word "perfecter" can also be translated as "completer".

Jesus perfects or completes your faith. Even if you run the race poorly, even if you sit down on the track pouting, Jesus makes sure that you finish the race.

Surely there are disadvantages to not running the race well. You might lose individual rewards. You might be embarrassed when you finally meet the Lord and the saints of old for how poorly you ran the race. There are good reasons to run well. However, keeping your salvation is not one of them. This is where the racing analogy breaks down, because everyone in the race is guaranteed the trophy. Jesus is the one who completes and perfects our faith, not us. Isn't that good to know? Run hard but know that if you stumble and fall, Jesus will pick you up and help you finish the race. So, don't stop running!

[Slide 6] How do you run the race? First, you have to strip down. Like a runner you have to get rid of everything that will weigh you down. Specifically you have to lay aside encumbrances and sin. Let's take those two separately.

Lay aside encumbrances. What are encumbrances? They are things that weigh you down and slow you down. A poor self-image is an encumbrance. A person has been told all their life that they are no good and worthless and they have come to believe the lie. That is an encumbrance to living the Christian life. False ideas about God and false doctrine are encumbrances. Shame is an encumbrance. Ungodly expectations are an encumbrance. Past hurts and memories are an encumbrance. Ignorance is an encumbrance. An encumbrance could be a material possession. Jim Nicodem in "The Gravity of Greed," says, "Read." Anything that hinders you in living the Christian life, which is not sin, is an encumbrance.

Evaluate your life. What holds you back from fully following Christ? Those are the things you need to lay aside.

[Slide 7] Sins also hold us back from running our race. The Bible describes sin as that which entangles. You get the picture that sin is like a rope that gets wrapped around your legs causing you to trip. I think of sinful addictions when I think of sin tripping us. It's not the one-time sins that are so disruptive. It's those sinful habits, deeply engrained in our lives that cause the most problems. You have to discard them in order to run the race. The second thing you have to do to run your race is to lay aside the sin that so easily entangles you.

[Slide 8] The third thing you have to do is to run your race with endurance. Expect your faith run to require perseverance. Expect that you will encounter hardship, trials, and difficulty along the way. The Bible would not exhort us to run with endurance if the race was going to be easy. Don't expect that when you get older or more spiritually mature that your race will somehow get easier. The hardest part of the race is usually the last part, when your muscles are tired and you're winded. Os Guinness tells the following story about the great Bible teacher John Stott. Tell story.

[Slide 9] The last thing you need to do is to focus your attention on Jesus as you run. Since the goal of our running is to become like Jesus, we need to keep him the center of our attention if we want to end at the right finish line. Scientists have discovered something very interesting about human beings. Listen to this story from Steve Inskeep from NPR. Read. Fix your eyes on Jesus so that you will end up at the right finish line.

Fix your eyes on Jesus so that you will run for the right reasons. You run out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for you. You run because you love Jesus and you know that this will please him. You run in order to glorify Jesus.

You run in order primarily to obey Jesus not in order to succeed. This is a subtle but important distinction as to which is the most important motive. If I run because my main motive is to succeed I may begin to see sin as that which prevents me from having victory in my life or

as that which causes me to fail rather than seeing sin as an act of disobedience to God. When I view sin solely as my loss of victory or my failure, the focus is still on me rather than focusing on how I have offended and dishonored my holy God. We can subtly graft good old American striving for success into our Christian race rather than racing in order to glorify Christ. What we want is a godly sorrow over how I have disobeyed my Lord that leads to a sincere repentance. The race metaphor is a helpful metaphor, but we have to make sure we don't corrupt it with pride and other wrong motives that we can so easily bring into an athletic metaphor.

Fix your eyes on Jesus to have a model of how to run the race. Jesus endured suffering looking forward to the joy set before him. Jesus provided the model of how to endure righteously. When we focus on him we learn how to endure our own suffering. Corrie ten Boom once wrote: Look around and be distressed. Look inside and be depressed. Look at Jesus and be at rest.

If you run a race and you look anywhere but the finish line, you will become disoriented, lose your direction, and soon stumble. Are you a runner that keeps looking behind you? Do you feel trapped by your past? Do you feel like you've made a horrid mess of things and that you'll never finish well? You need to fix your eyes on Jesus.

Are you a runner looking to the sides, watching the audience? Are you sensitive to what others think about you? Do you constantly look for that telltale frown, that suspicious smile, or those raised eyebrows of disapproval? Are you paralyzed by the fear that you will fail and no one will like you anymore? You need to fix your eyes on Jesus.

Are you a runner looking at the ground? Is all that you see is the immediate situation? You don't know where you're going. You don't know why you keep running? You need to fix your eyes on Jesus.

Finally fix your eyes on Jesus so that you don't become discouraged. Verse 3 says so that you won't grow weary and lose heart. Jesus endured hostility from sinners and still accomplished God's will for his life. I've mentioned before the possibility of persecution. We may face persecution in running our race. Paul told us we should expect it. When it comes, look to Jesus because he succeeded in spite of the hostility of sinners.

The word, "consider", in verse 3 connotes the idea of comparison as you consider. Compare your lot with that of Jesus. He made it with God's help. You can too. You don't have to bear the sins of the world. The most you have to bear is the pain and suffering of death. Jesus had to endure that plus bearing the sins of the world and experiencing separation from the Father. God will always be with you. The Lord and the Spirit will always be with you. Jesus knows what you're going through. Look to him. Share Joey Lee story. You endure for a person, for Jesus. You say to yourself, "This is nothing compared to what he went through."

As a church, we have been running the race well, Hope Fellowship. Don't stop running. Whatever challenges you face this year, whatever discouragement you may feel, don't stop running. When you're most tempted to quit, don't stop running.