**LET US FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS!**

Hebrews 12:1-3 (Key Verse 2)

*“…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.”*

Let us praise God who has granted us the opportunity to participate in the spring conference. Through Sh. Tsibela’s message we have learnt that it is God’s will and command for us to be strong and courageous, we have learnt that to truly be strong and courageous is not about physical strength and intellectual capability; in order to be strong and courageous we need to study the word of God, mediate on it day and night.

From Sh. Ivan’s message we have further learnt from Daniel’s 3 three friends (Shadrack, Meshack and Abednicco), who when faced with a life threatening situation they did not surrender to the King Nebuchadnezzar who wanted to throw them in a burning furnance, but with great strength and courage they said to him: “*we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”* They could say this because they had courage in God they serve, they had personal faith in God.

Through testimony writing we could meditate on the word of God from the messages, and were challenged to think about our very own personal Jordan river that we need to cross, we could think about our very own personal Nebuchadnezzar and were encouraged to obey God’s command to be strong and courageous, we were encouraged by Daniel’s 3 friends to exercise our faith fully in the God we serve.

However, as we leave the conference today the devil will try to snatch the grace that we have received, all of the sudden obedience to God’s word to be strong and courageous may seem impossible. All of the sudden our Nebuchadnezzar may become too big to confront. So, in order to overcome this, as we leave the conference we must not relax. What we have learnt from the conference is only the beginning. In order to obey God’s command to be strong and courageous, to maintain our personal faith in the God we serve, we need to consider our life of faith as a race, with the goal to finish and as we run the race, the key verse says we need to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ. Therefore, through today’s passage we will learn more about the race of faith, what attitude we should have as we run the race and what it means to fix our eyes on Jesus. May God have mercy on us to receive one word from today’s passage, grant us a clear direction on what to do to stay on course in our life of faith and live daily like Daniel’s friends.

The passage today begins in **verse 1** saying: “***1****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”* From this verse learn that we should consider our life of faith like running a race. Now what kind of a race is it like? What can we do to be successful in running the race? First the author says we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. What does this mean? Firstly, this means, the race of faith is not a lonely race, we are not alone. We are surrounded by those who have run the race before and have finished it, they are not just spectators who do not understand us. But they are witnesses who ran the race and testify that Jesus is the way of true victory. They are there to give us assurance that we are on track and encourage us to keep running. How do these witnesses speak to us and encourage us? Who are these witnesses? These witnesses speak to us through the word of God. When we study the word of God as we run the race, we can be encouraged by witnesses like our Father Abraham, Joshua, Daniel and his three friends, Apostle Paul and many others, and because of them we can overcome the temptation to give up and keep on running.

Furthermore, to finish the race it says: “*we must throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*” Sometime this year I was talking to my colleagues who participated in the Comrades Marathon in KZN, a 90 km race between Pietermaritzburg and Durban. In his preparation he had to cut off many things, sugar in his diet, cut off on his weight so that he light when running the race. His running garment (shoes and clothing) had to light, and this was important for him to finish the race, it was necessary so that it does not hinder him from finishing the race. In the same way as we run the race of faith, we need to cut off any hindrances that may prevent us from finishing the race, that may slow us down and lead us to give up. Now what are the hindrances in running the race of faith? One hindrance may be trusting in our own strength, when God commanded Joshua to be strong and courageous, he did not say now go and train as hard as you can, so that you can defeat the Canaanites, but rather he said to him: *“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.””* When we put our trust in our strength, it leaves us with a heavy weight on our shoulders, it makes us tired and hinders us from finishing the race.

Furthermore, another hindrance is being busy, busy with many things, at work, at school, sport, sometimes just being busy and not knowing with what, busy on Tik-Tok, Instagram and X. Being busy to such an extent that we do not even have time to study the Bible, to join Bible studies, write testimony and come Sunday worship services. Being busy with other things, to such an extent that one could not even join the conference even though they about it long ago. This kind of busy-ness hinderance to us finishing the race, it is hindrance, for when we are busy like this, doing the things of God feels too much, and unbearable. I for one, have been so busy lately at work, in fear of failing in my projects I saw myself spending so much time at work, leaving very late, even when I am at home my mind would be occupied with work. I would come back from work so tired and wishing I did not have Bible studies so I can just get home sleep and rest and go back to work to fight again. On Sundays I wished we had not had testimony sharing meetings, because I would be so exhausted. My busyness at work became a hindrance for me to run the race, it filled me with a heavy weight on my shoulder, which hindered me from running the race with joy. I pray that God may have mercy on me, to change my attitude, to prioritize studying his word over my work, so that I run the race without hindrance.

Furthermore, we learn that the other hindrance is: “…*the sin that so easily entangles*.” Sin is the most serious hindrance to us finishing the race, it is the most serious hindrance because it hardens our hearts and drives us away from God. One of the sins that is has been destroying many students and young professionals is the sin of sexual immorality, filling with guilt, enslaving them and driving them away from God. When you are in this sin, you cannot run the race, guilt and unworthiness put a heavy load on your shoulders that you even cannot move an inch. Another very serious sin that leaves many stagnant, is the sin of unbelief which arises when we face difficulties leading us to doubt and fear. The sin that is problematic that hinders is the sin of pride, hindering us from submitting. There are many other sins that hinder us from running the race, and the word today is urging us to throw off, meaning to lay aside, to stop. In **1 Peter 2:1** speaking of other sins says: “*Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.*” The word of God is urging us to repent, get rid, change our ways of sin. For if we continue, we cannot finish the race, we cannot stand up to our Nebuchadnezzars like Daniel’s friends, we cannot live with courage.

Furthermore, the word of God says: “*And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*” What does this mean? Firstly, the races is marked out for us, it is the will of God for us to run the race. God is the creator of the heavens and the earth, he knows us what we need, he knows our purpose because he is the creator, so I life goal is indeed to run the race of faith. Because it the will of God we know it is not in vain. Furthermore, we must run with perseverance. What does this mean? Perseverance tells us that the race of faith is not quick, it is like a marathon, and on the way, there are many challenges. In marathons there are challenges such as joint pains, cramps, dehydration, dizziness and many others, in order to finish the race, one needs to persevere. In the same way, in the race of faith, we will encounter many challenges which will tempt us to give up. Challenges that make us question if God is with us, challenges that seem impossible to overcome, challenges such as diseases, job losses, decisions to marry, failure in our studies, being misunderstood, rebellious sheep, life demands such as our jobs and schoolwork. In order to overcome, we need perseverance which is inner strength that allows us to move forward against opposition. How can we have this perseverance? We can build up perseverance through discipline and no compromise, in the study of the word of God, daily devotion and testimony writing. Daniel and his friends had great discipline, they did not compromise their identity when the went to exile in Babylon, they persevered in the race and they could grow into great man of faith who stood up before the king Nebuchadnezzar even to the point of death.

Let us look at our **key verse 2**: “***2****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.”* Through this key verse we are given the crux of it all, how to stay on course. We have learnt that that to finish the race, we need to throw off all hindrances, rid-off all sins that easily entangles, rid-off an self-reliance, rid-off any form of being busy that compromises spending time in the word of God, perseverance as we come across various challenges to reach the goal set before us. All this is not easy, how can we achieve it? With our own strength we cannot do it, we can do it only by fixing our eyes on Jesus. What does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? This means to keep thinking about Jesus, without having one attention distracted. The kind of thoughts we have make a great difference in our lives. When we have evil thoughts, we become negative and dark, and evil actions will follow. When we have godly thoughts, we will be hopeful, loving, joyful according to his character. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, he will rule our hearts, we will become like him.

The key verse also tells us more about Jesus Christ, whom we must fix our eyes on, it says: “*it says he is the pioneer and perfecter of faith*” What does this mean? This means Jesus also ran the race, it also reveals how he ran the race. It says he pioneered and perfected our faith. Jesus though he is God, he came down into this very sinful world, born in the most lowly form, in a manger. He lived amongst sinners and cared for them with great love and compassion. He diligently taught the word of God to people who were thirsty for the truth. He opened the kingdom of God and planted living hope in the hearts of despairing people. Jesus perfected the faith, he planted the living hope among the people, Jews and Gentiles, for the very first people could experience the love in a much deeper way. Through Jesus the great love of God was revealed, he was wounded, rejected, despised, put to shame, he was nailed on the cross for us.

In **verse 3** it says: ”***3****Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”* Jesus endured opposition from sinners. He became the object of criticism. When Jesus accepted sinners and ate with them, the religious leaders slandered him. When Jesus performed life-giving miracles by healing the paralytic and driving out evil spirits, they labeled him as demon possessed. They continually tried to trap Jesus in his words and deeds to have a basis to arrest and kill him. And Jesus never gave up, it was extremely hard, while in Gethsemane in **Mark 14:36** he prayed to God and said: “*Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.”*” Even though it was extremely hard, Jesus did not give up, he persevered, he ran the race to the finish line and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Let us fix our eyes on him, he has done it before, he is our perfect example. Daniel’s friends could stand up before the King Nebuchadnezzar because they too had their eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith.

When we leave here, just like Daniel’s friends we will face challenges, our faith will be challenged, we will face persecution, the devil will try to plant doubt, he will try to steal what we have received from this conference. We will face misunderstanding and rejection, slander, and intimidation. And this can lead us to become discouraged, and lose heart, and be tempted to give up the race of faith. The word of God today is urging us to consider Jesus. To consider him means to think deeply and carefully about him. As we consider Jesus, we find that he can understand us and strengthen us. He fills us with his Spirit and enables us to overcome weariness and run the race with vigor to the end. Furthermore, in the passage repeats the phrase “*Let us.*..” “*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus Christ*”, it was as such to encourage us to fix our eyes on Jesus together. Shepherd Ivan taught us yesterday the importance of friendship in the Lord, and the company we keep. Let us give the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood meaning, by fixing our eyes on Jesus together, help each other to overcome challenges, hold each other accountable and encourage each other to fix our our eyes on Jesus Christ. The race is not about competition, he gets to the end first, it is about finishing. Let us work together, help each other, so that we all can live each day with courage in God.