



## Run with Endurance

Hebrews 12:1-3

I am the type of person who prefers to do take on one project at a time. Whether I'm simply trying to help around the house or even doing church-related tasks. I like to have a form to my day, and I generally don't move on to the next thing until I've accomplished the previous item.

Now, that's my preference, but there are times when I can get distracted. Something can happen and I can't do what I've planned. Or, maybe I see on my iPhone a little number next to an app. Or, the phone rings. Or, maybe my brain just wonders if someone emailed me. There really are a million and one distractions that I can choose to focus on. And, I've honestly caught myself doing something that I wasn't planning on – and it was like my brain went on auto-pilot. Then it turned on and said to myself, "What are you doing? You need to get back to the task at hand!"

Distractions, by definition, keep us from doing what we ought to do. The same is true in our journey in this life as Christians. We know we ought to live for God's praise and seek him in our daily lives, but other things beckon us. We wake up in the morning and prepare for a new day by showering, getting ready, taking care of the kids, making breakfast, going off to work or staying home to teach the kids. You have a meeting or two with someone, accomplish some tasks and then, before you know it, it's dinnertime. You eat dinner and then your brain says, "I barely thought about God today." Well, the day is still in full force. You have to other things that need to get done before going to bed; so, you make a promise to yourself that you're going to spend time with God, but it has to wait. So, you do these other tasks like helping kids with homework or mowing the lawn. Finally, you go to bed, but you're exhausted. And, you drift off into sleep. Day after day moves forward in this monotonous cycle and you wonder to yourself, "How do I actually live for God's praise? I'm so easily distracted with *everything else* in life."

I want you to imagine the Roman church in the first century; the church this author is writing to. All the way back in chapter 2 of this written sermon, the author states his concern: "**we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.**"<sup>1</sup> What we know of these Christians is that they're entering into another season of persecution and rejection from their society. They have already gone through pain because of following Jesus. They were on open display and put down by their society. Then, some even lost their properties.

You can imagine what some are feeling as they're thinking about another round of persecution. Some might already be feeling exhausted just thinking about it. But others may have forgotten how those days strengthened them and spurred them on to focus on the Lord. Now, they realize they've become flabby

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 2:1.

because of their lack of pursuit of Jesus. The author of Hebrews concern is that they do not shipwreck their faith. He starts in chapter 2 by saying he's concerned that they would drift. But by chapter 5 he states to them all that they've become "dull of hearing." In other words, they drifted to distraction and their spiritual minds went on auto-pilot. They weren't focusing on what they ought to have been focusing on, and they were living life for other things.

It's in this context that the author of Hebrews places Jesus before them in all of his glory – showing them the superior majesty of Jesus. And, while showing them the majesty of Christ, he hopes their affections for Jesus surfaces again and causes them to focus on what truly matters – the Lord. If these people are genuine Christians, then the author is confident that a rehearsing of who Jesus is will lead them to focus once again on him and then live lives in line with Christ's glory. So, at the end of chapter 10, the author says, "**we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith. . .**"<sup>2</sup>

These words lead into chapter 11 – the chapter we just finished. And, what was the point of the author in this chapter? To show us what it looks like practically to live by faith, and to reveal to us that living by faith often involves difficulty and pain – yet because God is so glorious, it is worth it all to live by faith.

Now, you could have listened to all, or most, of the sermons in this series, and yet you still may be struggling with being distracted. You listen to a sermon on Sunday and think, "Wow, that was powerful!" Yet, during the week, your life isn't really changed. Your parenting, your speech, your attitudes are all essentially the same. It's just *so hard* to change habits in your life. And, if you're being honest, you like the distractions. Yet you know that when you hear a sermon or read about these people in chapter 11 that there is something more to be had.

I want to take that inkling of yearning and affirm that there is so much more to be had. If you have genuinely trusted in Jesus, then you have been summoned by God to live by faith – just like the saints throughout the ages! You're not called to live a distracted life, making it to the judgment day and then having God say, "Wake up!" You're to live an alert, focused life now. What does that look like? Well, in chapter 12, verses 1-3, the author boils it all down for us. These three verses provide the framework for all of the Christian life. So, please turn in your Bibles there, and before I read it, let me pray for us.

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*12 Therefore, 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.<sup>3</sup>*

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Let me ask you a question. Do you think the author of Hebrews wrote this letter and spent time detailing the lives of Old Testament saints so that the Christians in Rome would simply say, "Ok, this is good stuff. **I am now convinced to not turn away from Christian precepts.**" Is that the point? There is actually a huge difference between someone saying, "I won't turn from Christian precepts" and

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 10:39.

<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 12:1–3.

someone who says, **“I am going to follow Jesus.”** Christian precepts are important. But truth is to point us to our need for Jesus himself! I think there are many people who probably attend church regularly who simply *don't* deny Jesus. But what about actually believing who he is and living a life in dependence on him? Maybe you find yourself in that camp this morning.

In verse 1 here, the author starts off with the word “therefore.” That means that he had a purpose for what he was just writing in chapter 11. The purpose is that we would now live in light of the witnesses who have gone before us. To put it simply, we are to live by faith – like those who had gone before us. But before talking about what it means to live by faith, the author calls us to see something that is powerful and encouraging. We’re surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

The word picture that the author wants us to get here is one of a race in a stadium. Now, many of you know I’m not a big sport’s guy, but for me there’s something about the Olympics. I’m looking forward to the Winter Olympics and I love the summer games, too. I’ll watch the running in the stadium and look for the American flag and I’ll cheer on the Americans. Whatever your nationality, you’re probably prone to cheer for that same nation. This is *your* person who is representing *you!* “Go! Go! Go! You can do it! Don’t slow down!”

Now, if we do this from an earthly perspective, imagine the heavenly scenario. Here, the author wants us to **Listen to the chants of the saints throughout the ages.** The saints who have gone before us, like those in chapter 11 and all who have died before us, are related to us! We are family and part of the same kingdom – God’s kingdom. Like Abel, these saint’s lives and deaths speaks to us of what really matters: living by faith in God really matters. Yes, it’s hard, but Jesus is worthy! And these saints are cheering us on!

But they’re not simply cheering us on like I would an Olympic runner. They’re cheering us on because we’re connected with them all. As David spoke last week, they don’t receive the prize until every last Christian has finished. You see, God promises that *all* of his children win and that all of them win *together*. This makes me think more of a relay race. Human history is a relay race for God’s children and we’re all in this together until the last one makes it to the finish line. So, the saints are in the grandstands cheering all of us on. “Go! Go! Go! Don’t give up. Run harder. Jesus is worthy to follow. Don’t give up. Keep enduring!”

So, just like you might be motivated if you were in a race and you hear people cheering you on, how much more motivated should you be that the entire grandstands of Heaven is cheering you on right now! Can you fathom this? I hope you can begin to because this is true!

How motivating! And, just to make some practical application of this. I’ll say it again, this is why I think Christian biographies are so helpful for us to read. Studying the lives of Christians throughout the ages is so powerful because we learn the struggles, pains and perseverance, joys and it motivates us. They actually fuel me to keep running! This is how it ought to be. So, if you haven’t read a Christian biography in a while, pick one up! God has given us saints to look back to in order to spur us on in our lives! What practical grace of God!

God gave us a grandstand full of saints. And, they’re not in the grandstands so that you’d give up. We have a great cloud of witnesses saying, “By faith, you can persevere!” And you could respond, “But I’m weak.” Then Samson shouts out, “So was I.” But I don’t know what I’m doing or where I’m going. And Abraham says, “I felt that.” And you say, “But people think I’m so foolish, and Moses chimes in, “Don’t

worry about them!” All different types of people with all different kinds of personalities are saying, “God is worthy and he is merciful. He will strengthen and help those of us in the race.”

So, listen to the cheering, Ventura. But again, the cheering is for a purpose. God doesn’t have these people to cheer us on so that we simply say, “Oh, doesn’t it feel good to have these people cheering for us?! Yay!” If you’re not running, that’s a problem. That could indicate you’re not even in the race.

If you’re a Christian, the cheering will motivate. The author gives this illustration in order to call us to live by faith – like the saints in the Old Testament. But you could wonder what it practically looks like to live by faith. In these verses, I think we see that **Living by faith involves laying aside sin, running with endurance, and focusing on Jesus**. This is what the saints in the grandstands are calling us to do!

Each of these points fits within the illustration of a race, and I’ll try to help us grasp this picture as we move forward. So, let’s take the first point.

### 1. Living by faith involves laying aside sin (v. 1a).

Look at verse 1 again with me: Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely. . . .<sup>4</sup>

The illustration we have here relates to being ready for the race. If you are going to run, you don’t want anything attached to you that’s going to impede your speed. You are in the race to run, not to lose. And, since all Christians *win*, then we must live in light of that. We must lay aside the things that encumber us.

I think we can understand this illustration. It’s relatively straightforward, but what does that mean for you and me in our daily lives? Well, if you notice here, the author first says we are to lay aside every weight. Then he says we are to lay aside the sin. Some think that those phrases are synonymous. Meaning, the weights are the metaphor that refer to the sin which clings so closely. Others think that the author is talking about two different things. The weights are things that aren’t necessarily sins, but they’re distractions for us. Then the sin which clings so closely is something that is definitively sinful.

Personally, I think no matter what position you hold, the application is pretty much the same. If someone is not necessarily a sin for others, but it keeps you from focusing on Christ, then guess what? You are idolizing that thing, and it’s therefore a sin that so easily besets you. The point is the same here.

Take a good look at your life and evaluate those things that distract you from living by faith. Let’s get practical with this. For me, something that can so easily distract me is Facebook and email. A while back, maybe a year or two ago, I started noticing that even my reading had been affected by my Facebook addiction. I didn’t want to read anything longer than a Facebook post any longer. Now, that’s a problem. Not only because I’m a pastor who needs to read and study commentaries to prepare for sermons. But, as a Christian, I am to love the Lord with all my mind. I had seen studies that spoke of how technology was changing how our brains think and process, but at that point, I saw how it was affecting me.

Some people might say, “Pastor Timothy, it’s no big deal.” But I still have to deal with this. This past year, I took a whole month off of Facebook. Then I put in some helpful rules so that I would stay

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 12:1.

focused. There's still work for me to do. And the reason is not because the Bible says "Thou shalt not have Facebook." It's because the Bible says I am to be zealous to live by faith and to show to the world that Jesus is my treasure.

What about you? What are the weights and sins in your life? Look at your schedule. What do you devote time and energy on? What keeps you from focusing on the Lord? What are things that might be negatively affecting you and taking you away from the priorities that the writer of Hebrews even highlights. The priorities of being in the Word, being devoted to one another and exhorting one another daily in godliness.

Right now you might be thinking of something (or some things), and you're thinking, "But I don't want to." Listen to the saints! I imagine *every single one of them* would not only say "Run faster," but they would also say, "I wish I had ran faster. And you can. Go! Go! Go!" Put down those weights and sins!

Now, I understand that this could be painful. In the ESV, we read "sins that cling so closely." The King James Version refers to these as sins that so easily beset. The point is that there are unique sins that each of us faces in our race. Some battle against sensuality. While others are disgusted with that and yet battle anger. You could be consistently tempted with jealousy while another person finds that ridiculous. Yet that person battles against a judgmental spirit over people. There are a myriad of sins and various ways we can commit them. And, while you may battle something that someone else doesn't battle against, we're in the same race and *all* of us have to admit we have unique challenges.

Now, this should humble us and even call us to ask for help from others around us. But, in our culture, I think many of us coddle our sins. Let me give a little more explanation on this. Years ago, I was reading a book that had a quote from a prominent psychologist in the mid-to-late 1900's. This psychologist stated that we needed to get rid of the notion of sin. The problem in so much counseling, as he saw it, is people's guilt. He taught that if they just didn't feel guilty, then they would be better. This type of mentality seems to have spread in our 21<sup>st</sup> century psychology. I say that because today, much of psychology, is purely secular. And, even if it has an emphasis on the spiritual – it's the spiritual from a very generic perspective.

Personally, I do appreciate certain aspects of psychology. Through scientific study and evaluation, we can see how certain backgrounds affects behaviors. We see how certain things within one's own body affects one's demeanor. But, there's something grossly missing. Psychology has divorced the spiritual from the physical. Therefore, without Jesus, all that psychology can say is that something is a disease or a disorder. It seems many Christians even buy into this. We think that if psychology has a label, well then, there's not much the Bible can do. I mean, I know the Bible says it has the answers for life and godliness, but that was for people's lives in the Old Testament or 1<sup>st</sup> century New Testament. Not for us. So, some turn solely to medicine and don't consider that they may be missing Jesus.

Now, please hear me. I am not trying to make light of certain disorders and deficiencies. I believe they exist. And they can be legitimate weights and hindrances. But my concern comes in when trying to talk of Christ addressing a fellow believer and that Christian essentially says, "Hold on. This is just who I am. You don't get it."

Please hear me carefully. I know there can be questions on what I'm saying here. But hopefully a personal perspective is helpful here. My natural tendency is to move to the depressive side. I can also be quite obsessive-compulsive. I've had seasons in my past where these were almost completely

controlling of me. Now, I don't negate that these things were a part of my life and that they're also weights in my life. But if someone came to me and said, "The Bible says you must fight these," I can't say to them, "This is just who I am, and therefore I'm not responsible." No. The Bible says that before coming to Christ, we are *bound* in our sins. Yet, we're still responsible. And, now having come to Christ, I'm progressively freed to grow in fighting against sin – even those sins that so easily beset me. Christian, let's not make excuses. Instead, no matter how difficult or even oppressive those weights feel, let's move forward in faith.

I hope you hear why I'm saying this. I'm saying all of this because the author is telling us to see our sin. And, we need to know what sin is in order to remove it from our lives. Knowing that we all have besetting sins should humble us, cause us to have compassion on one another and it should also lead us to *kill* the sin in our lives! Since Jesus is as glorious as he is, he gives his common and special grace to fight against sin! The saints throughout the ages remind us of this. No matter the counsel they received in their generations, their answer is *live by faith, and lay aside sin!* But there's more. If our lives of faith are a race, then:

## **2. Living by faith involves running with endurance (v. 1b)**

The end of verse 1 says, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. . . ." <sup>25</sup>

Daily we fight and war and battle with the sins that so easily beset, but we also press forward in righteous living. This is important for all of us to remember. Some of you could be evaluating your lives and the sins in your lives and you could be thinking, "Ok, I need to get this thing out and that thing out of my life," but you're not thinking about how to replace those things with what is necessary. You see, if I just say, "Get rid of Facebook," but then I'm sitting around on the couch doing nothing, guess what I'm going to do? I'm going to get back on Facebook. You have to replace with something that is going to spur on to greater zeal.

So, as you evaluate your life, look at what needs to be included. And, I would add, ask other people in the church to help you with this. Do they have suggestions on what to do? Also, if you have ideas to change, others can help you to incorporate these ideas. I've found the best way to move forward is to tell someone else and then say, "Ask me about this!" They help to incorporate new habits. I think that idea is brought out in the plural of these words "let *us* run. . .the race that is set before *us*." We help one another to run.

Now, there's a couple other ideas given in these words. First, notice here that we need to run the race set before us. The idea is that there is a specific race that God has before *us*. The terrain looks different than Moses' terrain. It's not the same as the apostle Paul's. Even my terrain is different than your terrain. While we're running together until we make it to the grandstands, we all have unique challenges and joys.

One problem I think we can make in our pursuit of Christ is to pick someone we want to be like and then try to perfectly imitate them. Moms, you could be thinking about Susanna Wesley who had over 15 children, maintained her spiritual disciplines and pointed her children to Christ. How did she do that? So, you work hard to be like Susanna. In a week or two, you're discouraged because you're not like her. Well, hold on. Are you Susanna Wesley? And did God tell you to run her race? No. You have unique

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 12:1–2.

weaknesses and she didn't have. You have other strengths she doesn't have. Maybe running hard for you is a slower pace than hers. Maybe it's a faster pace but it looks different. Susanna is not your model. The Scriptures simply say you are to run the race set before us. What is ahead of us in this century? What's ahead of us in Holland, Michigan? What's ahead of us in our homes? Run *this* race. But secondly, this race is to be run with endurance. The point here is that the Christian life isn't a sprint. Isn't not a 500-meter dash. It's the long distance running. It's the type of race in the Olympics that you don't sit and watch the whole thing because at times it's boring.

Listen, the word "endurance" really isn't a word we love. But when we hear of others who endured, it's a powerful testimony – not of the people themselves, but of the God who empowered them to endure. The saints throughout the ages are shouting in the grandstands saying, "Endure! Persevere!" Run *your* race and don't give up. This reminds me of Paul's words to the Galatians when he says, "don't grow weary in doing well for in due season you will reap a harvest if you do not give up." Why did he say "don't grow weary" if we're not tempted to grow weary? Of course, we're tempted to give up. The Hebrew Christians were. And you may be tempted even today. And, I can guarantee some of you will be tempted even this week. From small situations to larger situations, we can be exhausted and lose sight of the fact that we are in a race of godliness – and we aren't to rest in this race! We are to win.

So, living by faith involves laying aside sin and running the race with endurance. But the next point is the point that fuels laying aside sin and running with endurance.

### **3. Living by faith involves focusing on Jesus (vv. 2-3).**

If you look at verse 2, it says "looking to Jesus." That means this describes what's happening while laying aside sinning and running the race of life. Looking to Jesus defines these things. Because you're looking to Jesus, you hate sin more. Because you're looking to Jesus, you have greater zeal to follow after him. Because you're looking to Jesus, you're willing to endure persecution and persevere even if you don't receive the promises in this lifetime!

Looking to Jesus is what is essential in our lives. Why? Because we are disciples of Jesus. We have been set free to follow him. Therefore, in whatever we do in our lives, we are to follow Jesus. But not simply follow him. We are to have our eyes set on him. The word for "looking to" actually can be translated "look away to." The idea here is to purposefully focus your attention on to Jesus.

This reminds us of our tendency to be distracted. I'm reminded of that movie *Up!*, and the dog named "Dug." He can speak and he talks to these new people he has discovered. As he's talking to them, he then gets distracted, turns his head and yells, "Squirrel!" He does this on a couple of occasions. You know, we do this, too. We look at money, cars, our homes, our family needs or job struggles. None of those things are innately sinful or wrong to think about; but we forget about Jesus and his sovereign rule. We forget what it means to live for the Kingdom of God while we live in the kingdom of this world. When we forget Jesus, then other sins creep in and we start to slow down in the race. We must daily remind ourselves to look away to Jesus. I would encourage you to plan interruptions in your day to remind you to look away to Jesus. Type it into your cell phone to give you reminders, "Look away to Jesus." Do something. Grow in the habit!

Christian, this is convicting to me. How often to I simply live life without gazing on Jesus? This past week, I came across a quote from a former pastor, and he said, "I am astonished at people who say they believe in God but live as if happiness is found by giving him 2% of their attention."

Honestly, if you or I just give God 2% of our attention, we ought not to complain when we have no joy in the Christian race. If we only give Jesus 2% of our attention, then we're simply focusing on enduring and trying not to be too bad. There's no relationship. There's no fuel for our living. Christian, if that's you, turn your gaze back to Jesus!

When we continuously are reminded of our need to look to Jesus and we look away to him, we are then spurred on. We fight sin. We grow in holiness. So, to use the running illustration, we don't just look at one another and the race another person is running. We don't stare at the grandstands as the saints are shouting "keep going." Instead, in everything, we set our gaze on Jesus. And, in setting our gaze on Jesus, we run faster and harder.

The author goes on to motivate us to do that by showing us how Jesus actually empowers us to run the race and lay aside sin. He first calls Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith. Founder can also be translated "pioneer." He's the one in whom our faith resides and he's the one who's paved the way for our faith! Without Jesus, we'd be lost in our sins and bound. And there'd be no reason for faith without Jesus.

But, as the author points out, Jesus endured the cross, despised its shame and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. In bringing these points out, the author is highlighting Jesus' faith. In his physical life on this earth, he trusted the Father and lived in dependence on the Spirit. The Spirit led him to the cross and Jesus followed. Even though the night before, he cried out "let this cup pass," he still moved forward, resolute with the plan. And he was even faithful on the cross.

Now, the cross was the most shameful execution the Romans came up with. It was so horrific that the Romans reserved it for the most heinous criminals, and it would be only on the rarest of occasions that a Roman citizen would be crucified. Yet Jesus, the King of all creation, was stripped, naked and bare before all, beaten to the point where you could see his muscles and bones. And there on the cross, he despised that shame.

That's a powerful statement. There was shame. The Romans intended ultimate shame by a cross death. But Jesus despised the shame. He thought the shame as *nothing*. Why? Because of what he was accomplishing on that cross. On that cross, as the author of Hebrews has told us before, Jesus took the wrath that sinners deserved so that God could then give sinners forgiveness and the gift of eternal life! All who trust in Jesus will be reconciled with God. And that's proven by the fact that Jesus then rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God. Jesus despised the shame of the cross because of what he purchased through it.

He now reigns and has been drawing people to him from every tribe, nation and tongue for ages and ages! This is what it means when the author says Jesus is the founder (or, pioneer) of our faith. Because of him, we have eternal confidence and joy in God. And, just as Jesus endured and rose again; so will it be for those of us who follow him. This life is worth running in because of the joy set before us.

But you could say, "This sound all good, but I just don't know if I can take one more step! This race is getting too hard." Well, just to get the point a little more, verse 3 goes on to say, "<sup>3</sup>Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Heb 12:3.



The word “consider” is related to our word “logarithm.” It means to carefully consider. Don’t just look away to Jesus, but gaze. Carefully consider him. Don’t be content knowing information about him. Know him – the fountain and stream of all pleasure at God’s right hand.

But, more specifically, consider him not only as the pioneer of our faith, but the perfecter of our faith. Verse 3 says that Jesus endured hostility from sinners. Not only did Jesus endure a cross and thus founded our faith. He endured hostility from people. So, in both circumstances and also relationships, Jesus was persecuted.

Yet he endured. And, by his endurance, he purchased something for us: endurance. If you have trusted in Jesus, then he promises that you have the strength to endure. He’s given you the Holy Spirit to move forward. The author says Jesus endured so that we will not grow weary or fainthearted. Do you feel like giving up. So did the Hebrew Christians. But praise God their endurance isn’t dependent on their feelings. It’s dependent on Jesus who promised. Therefore, depend on Jesus. Live by faith, run the race, lay aside sin and look to Jesus!

**Daily, remove distractions. Tell your mind to look away to Jesus and live life considering him. Then run with endurance. Someday, you will finish this course and sit next to the saints throughout the ages. When you’re there, you’ll cry out to other believers, “Run! It’s worth it! Go! Go! Go!” Then, finally, someday, when the last believer enters, there will be a celebratory feast at our awards ceremony!**

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