



# Staying Power

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Hebrews 12:1-3

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It was the early 90's. I had been at this church about a dozen years. My interest in church work was beginning to wane. I was bored and becoming restless. I was losing patience with people so set in their ways. "We've never done it this way before," was their rallying cry. I was becoming weary of people fussing about stupid stuff in the church.

Someone handed me the book *Under the Unpredictable Plant* by Eugene Peterson. I doubt many of you have read it since it's a book written by a pastor expressly for pastors. Peterson is known for his popular translation of the Bible called *The Message*. Some of you know of my affinity for C. S. Lewis. I would rate Peterson as the second most influential writer in my life, right up there with Tim Keller.

Peterson, who served a Maryland church for 29 years, makes the case for pastors staying put. There are reasons to go and reasons to stay. He urges us to remain where we are and grow there. Don't move around just because you are restless. He urges us not to believe everything we read in glossy religious periodicals about fast-growing churches. Avoid the temptation of thinking the grass is greener at another church.

I was ready to leave. I took Peterson's counsel to heart. I learned the value of staying put. Thank you, Eugene Peterson. Thank you, God.

Today's sermon is about Staying Power. One essential talk in Great Banquet weekends is the importance of Staying Power. We need staying power.

Hebrews is a letter written to encourage believers to persevere in hard times. Jesus' followers experience intense persecution in the first century. Some have become discouraged, ready to drop out. You may identify with their weariness, as we approach the one-year mark in this pandemic.

The passage I read earlier, the first three verses of Hebrews 12, constitutes a major turning point. The letter shifts from key theological themes to matters of practical concern. Its last two chapters act as the "so-what" section of this anonymous letter.

The first two verses constitute a single sentence in the Greek, totaling 74 words. My English teachers would have taken points off for a run-on sentence.

The controlling theme, "let us run" is embedded in the middle of the sentence. Run, the principle verb, appears in present tense, so it means to keep on running.

"Let us run with perseverance." Perseverance is key to this passage. The writer reminds us in verse 2 that "Jesus endured the cross." He follows up the same subject in verse 3 by imploring his readers to "Consider him who endured the cross."

Perseverance in the Greek (*hupomone*) is a compound word. *Hupo* means "under" and *mone* connotes "to remain," so literally the word translates "to remain under" or "abide." We need to remain with God. We need staying power.

"Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Our writer expands on this running motif by comparing

life to running a race. It has a start line and a finish line. Paul often likens the Christian life to a race (2 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; 2 Timothy 4:7).

The Ancient Olympics featured competitions in boxing, wrestling, javelin, long jump, and chariot racing. The premier event was long-distance running. This race developed into a marathon of 26.2 miles. Some of you have run a marathon.

We have established that, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” expresses the dominant theme. There are three subordinate participles that support this main idea. Participles are verbs that typically end in “-ing” that support the main verb. One family in the daily devotional this week referred to me as a *logophile*. I’ve been called lots of things in my day, but never a logophile. It’s someone who loves words--a word geek, you might say.

These three participles are bolded for you. The main verb is underlined. “**Having** a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, **laying** aside every weight and sin that so easily entangles us, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **looking** to Jesus, the pioneer and finisher of our faith.”

“Having a great cloud of witnesses” is the first participial phrase. Chapter 12 begins, “Therefore, having a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us...” One more time: Every time you see the word “therefore,” ask what it’s there for. “Witness” refers to the roll call of the faithful in chapter 11. There are giants in this faith list, Moses and Abraham. There are also lesser known faithful believers like Rahab and Jephthah.

The Greek word for witness (*martus*) is the source of our word “martyr.” A martyr is a witness to the point of death. Some of these witnesses in chapter 11 witnessed unto death.

We could add the names of believers to this list who have gone before us. I would add my brother, Tom, who ran his life of faith with fortitude and integrity. Who would you add to your spiritual hall of fame list?

“Laying aside every weight and sin” is the second participial phrase. Elite runners wear light-weight clothing and shoes measured in ounces. Weight and sin are words that are linked together. Sin functions as dead weight in running this race of faith.

“Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and finisher of faith” functions as the third participial phrase. The author uses Jesus’ human name rather than his divine title, Christ. The name Jesus focuses on the race Jesus ran on earth—this One who “endured the cross, despising the shame.” The Roman Empire executed its prisoners on a cross to publically humiliate them. This is what happens to anyone who opposes the mighty Roman Empire. Cicero called the cross “the tree of shame.” Jesus’ endurance on the cross becomes our impetus to live with perseverance.

Jesus serves as our pioneer and trailblazer. He blazes a trail for us to follow. He finishes what he starts. He endures the cross, despising the shame.

Are you running this race of faith? Sad to say the only race some of us are running is a proverbial rat race.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three applications to suggest to you this morning.

First application: Eliminate obstacles. “Laying aside every weight that hinders and sin that so easily entangles.” What hinders you from running this race of faith? What holds you back? Pay attention to what is coming to mind right now.

Your obstacle may be a reoccurring sin in your life. All of us sin, each in our own way. We all manifest a particular sin pattern based on personality and temperament. It could be pride, anger, lust, or greed—the list is endless. Maybe it’s time for you to get serious about leaving a sin behind. The New International Version translates this verse, “throw off every weight and sin.” Give sin the old heave-ho.

If only it were this easy. If you really want to make progress in defeating sin, ask someone to hold you accountable to eliminate a persistent sin from your life.

Not everything that hinders us from running this race is sinful. The reference to weight in this verse can refer to perfectly good things that have assumed exaggerated importance in our lives. Sports, TV, the internet, iPhone, books, music, you name it—all can distract us from running this race of faith.

Second application: Focus on the goal. “Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and finisher of the faith.”

I’m reminded of the story in the gospels of Jesus walking on the water during a violent storm. Jesus invites Peter to get out of the boat and walk in his direction. As

long as Peter has his eyes on Jesus, he stays above water. As soon as he turns his attention to the waves and wind, he goes under. There's a moral to this story. Keep the focus on Jesus. Don't look down. Don't look back. Eyes on Jesus.

The so-called "Mile of the Century" featured two of the great distance runners in the 1950's, England's Roger Bannister and Australia's John Landy. Both had broken the four-minute barrier in separate races, setting the stage for their showdown at Vancouver's Exhibition Stadium on August 7, 1954. The race was watched by 35,000 people. Another 100 million people listened by radio.

Landy surged to the lead and set the pace for the first three laps. Bannister was content to run a few paces behind. On the last lap, at the final turn, Landy glanced over his left shoulder to find Bannister. Bannister surged ahead at the same moment on Landy's right and sprinted to the finish line. Bannister crossed the finish line in 3.58.8. Landy was clocked at 3.58.9.

There is a bronze statue at the Vancouver Stadium depicting Landy looking over his left shoulder as Bannister passes him on his right. Landy later quipped, "While Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt for looking back, I am probably the only one who turned into bronze for looking back." Don't look back. Look to Jesus, our trailblazer in faith.

Third application: Never give up. "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3).

There are times when we become weary and lose heart. The sermon doesn't do anything for me. Reading the Bible has become monotonous. Worship falls flat.

One of my heartaches is watching so many people come and go from this church. I drive by houses where I can say—this person used to go to VPC. That person did also. When people become weary and lose heart, they drop out of church.

The author of Hebrews urges us to double-down on application number 2 when we become discouraged. Focus on Jesus. “Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners.”

Don't give up on God. God doesn't give up on you. God is faithful.

I'm talking in this last season of my ministry about what matters most. Run this race of faith. Run it with perseverance. Life requires resiliency. Staying power. We need Staying Power.