

# FOR THE JOY

Hebrews 12:1-3

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, 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. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Did people get out and vote this past week? That is a question many had as they considered their choices. Besides their core supporters, were people really excited about either candidate? Was it a matter of considering the lesser of two evils?

“Eyes on the Prize” was the title of a PBS series on the civil rights movement. It showed how people were willing to face a lot of opposition—abuse, imprisonment, violence—because they looked to the freedoms they hoped to gain. But more often we are motivated by simpler things. When Bill Clinton won his first election as president his campaign manager James Carville made the statement “It’s the economy, stupid.” The idea was that people will vote more to what benefits them as individuals than to some noble cause. Each day it is easier for us to be motivated by what brings satisfaction, comfort, or enjoyment to “me” right now.

How do we match that with the words of Hebrews?

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

In the Declaration of Independence Jefferson wrote the famous words, “All men are created equal. They have been endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among those being, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” For our world today the big goal often is the “the pursuit of happiness.” That can be seen as the whole purpose of having life and liberty. Life is ultimately about what makes me feel good. That is so often the thrust of advertising which fuels so much of our economy. Why bother with living the life that Jesus calls us to do?

Jeffrey Rosen wrote a book called “The Pursuit of Happiness” which explores how Jefferson got that idea. “Happiness” was an idea that came from Roman culture and was emphasized in the 1600 and 1770’s by European scholars as not talking about pleasure, but

virtue. The pursuit of happiness did not mean doing something for my pleasure, but doing the right things to benefit others.

That is a noble idea, but one missed by Jefferson and others. Though he did help to found good principles in our country, Jefferson was a slave holder who fathered children through one of those slaves outside of his marriage. He was constantly wracked by debt because of his spending habits.

And he was no different than any of us are. It is always so easy for us to wrap up our lives on the “pursuit of happiness” as the way to put me first in life. It is the sin that “so easily entangles,” as Hebrews says.

That is why Hebrews tell us to “fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” Why? Because He gives us a different reason to live our lives. “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.”

“For the joy.” Jesus went the way that led to His suffering and death. Why? “For the joy set before Him.” What gives Jesus joy? Why would Jesus have to be involved in a “pursuit of happiness”? If as God He has everything, what is there for Him to pursue?

In Luke 15 Jesus tells the famous parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. He concludes both stories by saying, “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.” What gives God the greatest joy is when a lost person is found—when he or she is brought to faith in Christ Jesus.

God wants us to share that joy. That is why Jesus came to this earth to give us life and liberty—the new life which wakes us from the death of sin and free us from living for “me” to the pursuit of real happiness—living for God by loving others. That is the virtue that we were created with by God, but lost because of sin. In Jesus, God restores us to the genuine “pursuit of happiness,” to live in the joy of winning the lost.

I have told the story many times before about the boy who came home from school excited because he was given the project of making a birdhouse. He wanted to do it with his dad. Dad was tired from work and did not have the same enthusiasm for the project as the boy had. But he noticed how the boy had collected some scrap lumber, old paint and tools for the project. So together they put together what could be considered a birdhouse. The boy was so excited by it that he put it on the kitchen table before bed anticipating the excitement of taking it to school.

After the boy went to sleep the father went back to his workshop and found some good wood he had been saving for a special project. He carefully measured and cut it out, using

special tools to make a beautiful birdhouse and painted it neatly. Satisfied with his work, he placed it on the table and took the first birdhouse and threw it away.

The next morning the boy woke up ready to go, then ran into the kitchen and his face dropped. In near tears he asked his mom, “Where is my birdhouse?” His mom replied, “It is there on the table.” He said, “No, where is the house that me and dad made?” The father heard this from his bedroom. He sheepishly went outside to the trash, took the first birdhouse out of the can, dusted it off, and brought it to the kitchen. His son’s face lit up. That day the boy went off to school wanting to show his classmates. “Look what me and my dad made!”

God wants us to be able to say that as well. He wants us to have the joy of saying, “Look what me and my Dad made!” He shares with us what gives Him greatest joy—saving the lost. As God Almighty He could do it just fine by Himself. But instead He wants to include us in that. “For the joy” Jesus endured the cross. “For the joy” of saving the lost and letting us be in on that.