

Forward
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When COVID hit – it seems like our lives hit a pause button. Businesses were on pause. Churches were on pause. Careers were on pause.

And one thing we learned is that if you stay paused too long – you actually tend to stay stopped or even go in reverse.

Many businesses that had to pause will never reopen.

Many jobs that were put on pause will never be restarted.

Many churches that were on pause will never regather.

As the elders talked about this we concluded that it's time for us to move forward! Forward in our lives, our careers, our families and our faith. Forward in our church. We've been on pause long enough.

We're going to spend this month sharing vision for our future in a sermon series called Forward – Regaining our Momentum. We're going to talk about our vision for moving forward in areas like discipleship, community, diversity and family.

Momentum is progress or development that is becoming faster or stronger.

Momentum is the force of movement.

The one thing I remember from physics classes is this – force equals mass times acceleration. A train travelling 50 mph can bust through a steel-reinforced concrete wall without stopping. But if that train is parked in front of that same wall it cannot move forward. Why? It has mass but no momentum.

Momentum is a powerful thing. If you have momentum, things seem to happen easily. But if you lose momentum, it's hard to get back.

Momentum is the tendency of a moving object to keep moving unless another force stops it or slows it down. Think of all the momentum that has been lost because of COVID. Our economy was booming, but it lost momentum. Many businesses that were thriving are now dying or closed. And they will never come back because of lost momentum.

Moving forward with momentum is something that is gained over time. Matthew 4:23-25 talks about when Jesus started His ministry in Galilee.

Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria. People brought anybody with an ailment, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. More and more people came, the momentum gathering.

We see here that momentum gathers, grows and strengthens.

Momentum enables you to keep moving forward!
 When I say move forward it can mean many things like:
 To move forward toward a goal
 To increase or accelerate growth
 To change for the better
 To make progress

God's will in every area of life is that we move forward.
 We should be moving forward in our relationship with God; which means we should be getting closer to Him, not falling away from Him.

We should be moving forward in our relationships with people; which means we should be getting closer, not drifting apart.

We should be moving forward in our finances; which means we're getting ahead of our bills, not falling behind.

We should be moving forward in our education; which means we're moving to the head of the class, not the bottom of the class.

We should be moving forward in our career; which means we're moving up the corporate ladder, getting promoted – not demoted.

And moving forward does not happen by accident. It comes when we follow the ways of God. All it takes to go backwards, get behind, fall away or drift apart – is to do nothing. Moving forward takes effort.

Today I want to explore what it takes for us to move forward. And to do that, I want to take a look at a group of people we find in the book of Hebrews. These first century Christians came from a Jewish background. They had met Christ and had gotten off to a great start. But now, they were considering walking away. Things had gotten hard and there was pressure to turn their back on Christ. So the writer of Hebrews pleads with them to keep moving forward. Hebrews 12:1-2 says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us throw off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress, and let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy that He knew would be His afterward. Now He is seated in the place of highest honor beside God's throne in Heaven.

I see four things in this passage that show us how we can keep moving forward in our walk with Christ over the years.

1- To move forward we must put off everything that trips us up.

Hebrews 12:1 says: *Let us throw off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress.*

In virtually every kind of athletic event, excess weight is not good. Unless you are a sumo wrestler, then it's fine. In 2002 a man named Lloyd Scott set a record in the London Marathon. You probably think he must be fast, but it was quite the opposite. He actually set the record for the slowest marathon ever in history. Lloyd Scott finished in 5 days, 8 hours, 29 minutes and 46 seconds. Why so slow? Unlike other runners who were wearing running shoes, nylon shorts and a tank top, he was wearing a diver's suit with a full, metal helmet. He did it as a fundraiser for leukemia.

What a great picture of many of us in the race of the Christian life. We're in the race, but we're weighted down. What's holding you back? Slowing you down? Tiring you out?

This verse says there are two kinds of things that we may need to let go of that trip us up or slow us down. Number one, let go of the **ungodly**. Let go of sin.

Now listen – every one of us has a besetting sin, something that easily hinders us. It is usually some appetite that is hard for us to control. If not dealt with, it can become a full blown addiction that controls our lives. Talk about weighted down.

The only way to deal with sin is to repent – which means to recognize the sin, confess it as sin and receive the forgiveness of God. Sometimes, if we are in an addiction, it may take a time of recovery, being with other people who support you as you get free.

Can I ask you, is there some area, right now, that the Holy Spirit is calling your attention? Maybe it's some addiction, or deceitful business practices, or you have a hard heart toward someone you need to forgive. Or maybe you're in a flirtatious relationship that you need to let go of. Those things will hinder your relationship with God. You know it's wrong and you know it hinders your spiritual walk. You must choose to let go and put it off.

And the reason God said to let them go is not to hold back from you life's pleasures, but God loves you and He knows those things will ultimately destroy you. So, let go of the sin that holds you back.

There's a second kind of weight and that is to let go of the **unnecessary**. Now this one's a little more subtle, because it's not sin, but it still keeps us weighted down from our moving forward.

- It could be something as simple as that your life is so full, that there really is no time or energy left to pursue your relationship with Christ.
- It could be that by having your kids in 6 different extra-curricular activities,

there's no time for spiritual things.

- It could be hours wasted in front of the TV or on Facebook or playing games.

If you want to move forward, you must be ruthless about getting rid of things in your life that weigh you down, distract you, and steal your passion for Christ.

2 Timothy 2:3-4 says:

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs - he wants to please his commanding officer.

Soldiers get rid of anything that is unnecessary that would hinder their fight. As Christians, we must get rid of unnecessary things that distract us from being the kind of soldiers that God wants us to be.

So finish this statement - in order to move forward, I need to let go of what? What is it, right now, that God brings to mind?

2- To move forward we must persevere until we cross the finish line.

Hebrews 12:1 says, *Let us run with endurance this race that God has set before us.*

Down through the ages greatness has often been defined by the ability to persevere and overcome obstacles. We've heard many true stories of people who persevered despite hardship and opposition. It's easy to look at "successful" people and think that it's all come easily to them. In many cases that is not what happened.

- Thomas Edison's teachers gave up on him and here was their evaluation: "He is too stupid to accomplish anything." But Thomas Edison learned to persevere. He tried almost 10,000 times before he succeeded in creating the electric light.
- Colonel Sanders went to more than 1,000 places trying to sell his chicken recipe before he found an interested buyer.
- Walt Disney was once fired by a newspaper for lack of ideas.
- Henry Ford, before he succeeded, failed and went broke 5 times.
- Abraham Lincoln ran for office and failed 5 times before he was elected president.

These people all persevered until they succeeded. As Christians we have so many more reasons to persevere.

But we live in a culture that wants everything convenient, instant, now. We can carry that over into the Christian life and when we don't always get instant results, we give up. 1 Corinthians 15:58 says:

Therefore my dear brothers stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give

yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

So no matter how long the storm lasts, no matter how dark and scary things get, no matter what wave batters against your life, stay with it.

Paul can testify to this. He was imprisoned, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and left for dead many times. He had to endure cold, pain, and danger. But he never gave up. In fact, none of the hardships had the power to make Paul quit. None of it kept him from moving forward.

And we must decide in advance that we are going to keep showing up and keep serving, and keep going as long as the Lord gives us breath. Because there will be some hard days. There will be some valleys. There will be some times when God seems distant and there will be some circumstances that you can't explain and don't make sense.

It is not in those times that you need to decide, "Am I going to follow or not?" Decide now to keep moving forward.

So let me ask you this question. Where's an area that you need to persevere? To keep pressing on?

3- To move forward we must keep a single-minded focus.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us: *We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus on whom our faith depends from start to finish.*

Now before we go any further, I want you to notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say that you ought to keep your eyes on your circumstances, your church or on your pastor or your president. All of those things and all of those people will eventually let you down and disappoint you along the way.

It is only when the Lord Jesus becomes the center of your focus that you'll find strength to endure this marathon called the Christian life.

Now it sounds really spiritual to say keep your eyes on Jesus, but how do you do that? In our everyday lives, what would that look like? Well this much I know; it won't happen by accident. The word "focus" implies concentration and intention. While life is a race, you cannot develop spiritual intimacy on the run.

When you study the life of Jesus you discover that He was not in a hurry. He always had time for the Father and time alone.

Here's a truth I don't want you to miss; if you're going to keep your focus on Jesus, you will have to slow down long enough to spend time alone in His presence.

To hear God and know God, you must create space in your life. You must create moments in your day when you can be alone and undistracted in His presence. Those times will not only help you grow, but they will replenish and nourish your soul. Philippians 3:8 says:

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake, I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Paul says that nothing is more important than pursuing a relationship with Christ.

So let me ask you – when can you set aside time just to be with our Father, just to slow down long enough so you can focus on Jesus?

You must do that if you want to move forward. And lastly...

4- To move forward we must endure the suffering to receive the joy.

Hebrews 12:2 says: *He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy He knew would be His afterwards.*

The writer of Hebrews uses Jesus as an example of someone who kept an eternal perspective. He looked past the suffering of the cross to the joy that would be His when He would be united with His Father and His family – the redeemed.

In this race called life, we need to regularly look up and look ahead to the finish line. When life gets hard and when the race gets tiring, look up and you will see your heavenly Father cheering you on. When you're feeling down and like you can't go on, look up and reach out to the Father for His strength.

Get an eternal perspective. Remember, this life is preparation for eternity. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says:

These little troubles are getting us ready for an eternal glory that will make all our troubles seem like nothing.

Sometimes that's hard to believe – but the Bible says our present problems will seem like nothing compared to the glory of heaven!

Some of you are now going through a difficult time and you wonder where's God in all this? Don't give up. Keep going. Choose to walk by faith, not by sight. Keep one eye on heaven.

Paul says in Philippians 3:14

I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God through Christ Jesus is calling us to heaven.

We are able to endure the present because we know some day the pain will be gone. There'll be no more tears. We'll be with our Father.

As we conclude, I want to leave you with this final thought. In the sixth chapter of the Book of John, we read of a miracle of Jesus feeding 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch of 5 loaves and two small fish. The Bible says everyone ate until they were completely full. The next day the crowds tracked Jesus down again and they said, "Do another miracle for us." And Jesus, knowing what was in their hearts said to them, "The only reason you're seeking me is because yesterday I fed you."

He goes on to tell them that life is more than food and physical provision and blessings. He begins to teach them the hard truths about life.

When He was done, a lot of those gathered around Him concluded that, "This is a hard teaching. Who can understand this?" And then in verse 66, there are some tragic words:

From this time, many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.

And as these people turn and walk away, Jesus looks at the twelve disciples and asks them, "Are you going to leave Me, too?" I love Peter's response in John 6:68-69

Where else would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You the Christ, the Son of the living God.

I believe there comes a day and a point of life where every person who follows Christ needs to drive a stake of commitment down in the ground. Because people will walk away and you will be let down in life and sometimes, life will become overwhelming. But at some point, you have to step up and say, I have made my choice.

That's my last questions: Have you chosen to follow Jesus Christ?
 And will you keep moving forward until you reach the finish line?
 Not following because of the blessings. Not following because He fed us.
 Not following because I think it's the formula for the good life.
 But following Jesus because He is who He says He is.

And where else would we go?
 He alone died for our sins on a cross!
 He alone rose from the dead with resurrection power!
 He alone has the words of life!
 In fact, He alone is the way, the truth, and the life!
 He alone is the author and finisher of our faith!
 He alone took our sin so that we could become righteous!
 And He alone is worthy of all our thanks and praise and worship!