

AERODYNAMIC
Hebrews 12:1-2

I have a dream. My dream is that Laurie and I are going on a vacation trip on an airline and all we have with us is one bag apiece that we carry on and store on the aircraft. I fear I may never fulfill that dream in real life. On our recent trip we went to Maui where the temperature ranged from a high of around 85 during the day to a low near 70 at night. Such a climate makes packing rather simple. You need shorts, swimwear, T-shirts, underwear and flip flops. No jeans, no long sleeved shirts, no sweater, no sweatshirts, no jackets necessary. This would seem to make my dream a totally reachable possibility.

What we actually took on our trip was one large duffel bag that we checked through, two carryon size suitcases, a backpack and a bag that served as a purse for Laurie, though this purse was large enough to contain the state of Rhode Island. Five separate bags isn't all that outrageous I suppose, but when you are moving around airports and shuttle buses it's not trivial either. It meant that we had to not get in a hurry because I had to carry a pretty heavy duffel bag, wear a backpack on my back and pull a small suitcase on wheels. I assure it, it's not that easy.

Why so much stuff? Well we wanted to play tennis while we were there. That meant we had to bring tennis racquets and they don't fit in carryon bags, thus the duffel was necessary. That also meant we had to bring tennis shoes of course, and some tennis balls. We also planned to do some snorkeling. We have snorkels and masks so it made sense to pack them rather than rent them at our destination. And we wanted to do a lot of reading. Since we don't have I-pads or Kindles that meant we had to pack books. You can see what happens. We started out light and simple, but the next thing you know I'm turned into a pack mule.

In the coming weeks I am going to give a series of sermons I call "Keep It Simple." We will be thinking about simplifying our lives, for it seems to me that is the path to greater peace and freedom. As you will see I do not merely mean having fewer possessions, though that is a subject we'll need to think about. I am thinking about all the accumulations of our lives, including, demands, bad thinking, commitments, desires, feelings and emotional baggage. Most of us have thought at some point, "how did I get here?" Like me hauling all of our luggage around an airport wondering how we ended up with all that stuff we wonder how our lives got so demanding and stressful. We dream of just chucking it all. I talked to a person on Maui who said she just got tired of the rat race in her hometown on

the mainland and what it was doing to her, so she gave it all up and moved to the island in search of a simpler life. We know that dream and most of us have some form of it that we've imagined at one point. But I assure you, while a slower pace might be appealing, it's not the answer. What we're looking for is deeper than where we live. It has to do with what is inside of us. To get us started down the path to a more simple life let's look at Hebrews 12:1-2.

LIGHTEN UP

This passage begins "therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses." This is a reference to all the people mentioned in chapter 11. They were mostly Old Testament people like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and David, all of whom demonstrated persistent faith. They are the witnesses that living by faith is both possible and powerful.

This raises the question: why should I care? The average person on the street isn't thinking about how he or she can live a life of faith. They might be preoccupied with how they can find a new job or hook up with that man or that woman they are obsessing about or about their marriage problems or how they can find some way to become more financially secure, but they're probably not obsessing about how they can live a life of faith.

The premise behind the whole book of Hebrews is that nothing is as important as knowing God, as being a part of his kingdom, as having the promise of eternal life that he gives, and as walking with him in his ways throughout life. In the book of Hebrews that idea is a presupposition. It is not argued nor proven, it is simply a given starting point.

I'm not going to argue it or try to prove it today either. I will simply state that if an eternal God is real, if he really did create us and does have a purpose for our existence, then by far the most important thing is to get rightly related to him. To ignore him and pursue our own plan in life would be foolish to the point of insanity. To connect with him will be that which we need most and will be the smartest thing we can do. So I'm going to use that as my starting point today.

Hebrews 11 tells us that the way to live connected to God is by living a life of faith. The witness of the lives of those people of faith in that chapter calls on us to follow their example. The writer then uses the example of running a race as an illustration of living the life of faith in Jesus Christ. In our society the writer would likely have used football as his metaphor because football is so popular and

familiar to us. In the first century the equivalent of football was the Olympic games. Those games involved contests like wrestling and the type of track and field events we see in the Olympics today. They did not include events like rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming. Just an aside.

The ancient games would be X-rated today because they did not use the kind of skin tight suits you see many modern athletes wearing. That's because they ran only in skin. They didn't wear anything at all when they competed. The reason is obvious. They wanted to be as light and as aerodynamic as possible. The last thing they wanted was to wear a bunch of heavy clothes that would weigh them down or might even cause them to trip.

These verses call on us to also to strip down and become more aerodynamic in a metaphorical sense. Our car has an aerodynamic shape that is designed to ease airflow over it. The shape of it is reminiscent of an air foil, designed to create a laminar flow over it. The reason for that is that Nissan wanted the car to expend less energy fighting air resistance so that more of the energy the engine puts out will go to accomplishing the car's goal, which is to move forward. The shape is more efficient. These verses are about lessening the resistance we have to deal with in life so that we might expend more of our energy in accomplishing our goals and less in just fighting resistance.

It is important to note that the verse mentions two things. There is sin that entangles us. One of the funnier things I remember seeing in a gym happened a long time ago when I was in high school. Our high school had horrible football teams, but my last two years in school we had one of the top basketball teams in the state. They lost one game in two years. Anyway, at one game we were obliterating the other team. A couple kids on the opponents fouled out and in desperation the coach called a kid who never played to enter the game. This poor kid had sat on the bench all year never playing. When the coach called his name he was so flustered when he tried to take his warm up pants off he didn't get them all the way off before he hurried to run onto the court. You can imagine what happened. He tripped over his own warm ups and made a glorious entrance onto the court by doing a face plant. This verse warns us that sin has that precise effect on us.

Sin will always muck up our lives. That's the message we see from Genesis 3 on through the rest of the Bible. Adam and Eve sinned and the results in their lives were terrible but they have also been catastrophic for the entire human race. In

Numbers 13 the people of Israel were instructed by God to enter the land he had promised them, but they didn't believe God could give enable them to conquer the people living there so they refused. There were two sins there, the sin of not believing God, which ultimately is at the heart of every sin, and then direct disobedience. How did that work out for them? They ended up getting exactly what they didn't want, which is to spend the rest of their lives as nomads wandering through a desolate wilderness. David decided he wanted a woman who was married to another man. Even though he already had plenty of women in violation of God's ideal he had to have this one more. So he ordered Bathsheba to sleep with him. How did that work out for him? It was a disaster. Sin is always a disaster. It always entangles us and causes us to fall in our effort to run the race.

Often when Christians talk about sins their understanding is way too shallow. At its core sin starts with two things: not believing God and wanting something more than you want to do what God says. Every single time you operate out of those two disastrous mindsets you are sinning and in so doing you are tripping yourself up.

But there are other things we accumulate that may not be so easy to notice. These will be different for each of us. But I'd like to point out some that are obvious in my life that also probably exist in yours. The first of these is *fear*.

Fear is a factor for all of us. It acts as an unwanted brake on our ability to efficiently travel through this world. I saw a video of a talk by Sir Ken Robinson, author and speaker, at the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference. He was talking about education and made the point that our education systems are actually teaching kids not to be creative. He said that in our education systems kids learn to fear being wrong. Then he said, "if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never do anything original." Creativity requires failing and being wrong.

Laurie and I had a recent encounter that made just that point. We walked into an art gallery. We weren't going to buy anything but we like to look at some of the art they have at this particular gallery. Years ago we bought one of our favorite paintings there. When we walked in one of the sales people latched onto us. I wanted to ask him to just leave us alone, but before I could he said, "I'd like to introduce you to someone." He took us over and introduced us to Roy Tabora. He is an artist whose paintings we have admired for some time. In fact our favorite painting was by his cousin whose style is very similar to his. Mr. Tabora is quite well known. I assumed we would quickly chat with him for a minute or two and express our appreciation for his work, then he would move on to paying customers.

To my surprise he seemed to want to talk to us. We conversed for a good 15 minutes. We kind of wished he would stop because he was going to do some painting and we wanted to watch. But then we saw the piece he was working on. It was beautiful. It looked complete to me. I said, "Isn't this one done? It looks finished." He said, "Oh no, I've still got work to do on it." Laurie asked, "How do you know?" He shared his approach with us. He said you have to start out pushing it, adding touches until you ruin some paintings. That's how you learn how far you can push things. In other words, you have to be willing to be wrong, to make mistakes, to fail. But because we fear failing so terribly we lose our creativity.

That's just one example of how fear can inhibit us. We all know what a terrible taskmaster fear is. It's funny how prevalent it is. I happened to mention playing tennis in a recent sermon. Hearing that Dave Marrs asked me if I'd like to play tennis with him. I said certainly. He called me that week and set up a time to play. Now I need to tell you that I am a real hacker. I'm a lousy tennis player. Perhaps you've noticed a theme. Crummy baseball player, awful hockey player, lousy tennis player. You might ask, "what do you do well?" Still trying to discover the answer to that one. Anyway, when Dave set up the date he suggested we play at the tennis club he belongs to. Tennis club? Uh oh. He belongs to a club? All my life when I've played it's been on public courts basically. If he belongs to a club he almost certainly is going to be out of my league. If I go play against him I'm sure to humiliate myself. A fear factor instantly showed up. I felt that tug that boils down to "I might look bad," which really means, "I can't stand to have someone think poorly of anything I do." In other words, I'm afraid of what he'll think.

Now that's not a big deal. But it raises the question of what else do I not do because I'm afraid? There are quite a few things. Most of us have failed to speak up and say what we really think at some point even though it was really needed because we were afraid of what people would think. Most of us, I dare say all of us, have missed opportunities to tell someone about the good news of Jesus because we were afraid.

Romans 8:15 says to Christians, "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." God is not the one who inputs a lot of fear in our hearts. The fear that he gives us is healthy fear. He gives us fear of stepping off a balcony on the 30th floor or of stepping on a rattlesnake. But he is not the author of the pervasive fears that are so common for us. He does not put a terrible fear of ever taking a risk or of some nameless terrible thing happening in the future to us.

There are other things that hinder us in our attempts to run the race. For lack of a better description I will say that one of the things is a ***confused agenda***. Dr. Leon Morris wrote in his commentary on Hebrews that the encumbrances that trip us up may not be sin but “the superfluous in our lives.”

In coming weeks we will look at some specific examples of the superfluous, but I want you to think about it in general for the moment. Laurie has a music student who is a very precocious little girl. She is quite confident of herself. She also is all over the map. She wants to do everything. Right this minute. She doesn't like to stay on a task more than a minute or two and she wants to be involved in so very many things. The problem is that her many activities make her schedule absurdly crowded. The effect of all of this is that Laurie's little student makes almost no progress in music because she never has the time to actually sit at a piano and practice. It's odd, but people have the strange idea that there's something magical about lessons. They seem to think if they go to a lesson once a week they'll get better at something. It apparently doesn't occur to them that the teacher's job is to teach them proper technique and to direct them, but only they can work to develop the technique, which they must do through practice. Laurie's student's inability to stay focused on something and her effort to do everything keep her from actually mastering anything.

Now that's all right in a little girl. She has time to grow and discover what she wants to put her effort and time into. But it is disastrous for us in life. I don't know about you, but I think I have spiritual attention deficit disorder. I get some spiritual truth in my head, and instantly it seems as though some new thought comes along and displaces it. That new thought is usually something trivial or tangential to the real direction I want my life to go. I guess you can think about coming to church services as being like music lessons. Here we get reminded of proper technique, but the real work comes during the week as we have to practice it.

We have a tendency to want to do everything. We want to be noticed and approved by other people, we want to be “successful” at something, we want to have a lot of the stuff of this world, we want to do God's will, we want to be spiritually strong, we want to not be rejected by those around us, we want to be comfortable, we want to not hurt, we want to make a difference, we want to have a healthy marriage, we want to have some enjoyable hobbies, we want to be wise with our money, we want to be great parents. In other words, we have a lot of desires pulling at us, none of them overtly wrong, many of them excellent, but they're not all the same. Here's the bad news: just like Laurie's little student simply can't do everything she

wants to do, neither can we. And those various agendas often compete, pulling us in different directions. In our effort to accomplish them all we end up compromising them all and mastering none of them.

Stick with the analogy that God gave us in Hebrews 12. You are running a race. When you are in a race, how many agendas do you have? Are you worrying about how you look? Are you looking around to see who is at the track meet today? Are you worried about what the other runners will think of you? Are you wondering how your investments are doing? Are you day dreaming about the new car you would like to buy? If you are doing any of those things you are a terrible runner and you're going to lose. When you are in a race you have only one agenda. Run the course and get to the finish line first. You are quite clear on where you are going. You see your lane and you see the finish line. It's all about stay in your line and run as direct a course to the finish line as you can run and doing it fast.

In Philippians 3 Paul tells about how he lived and it is a model of having a clear agenda in life. In the second half of verse 13 and verse 14 he wrote, "But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." One thing I do. He kept his eye on the goal and pressed ahead.

FOCUS

So what is to be the agenda? How are we to know what to do? Hebrews 12:2 tells us. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The Greek word translated "fix our eyes" originally meant to "look away." It came to mean to stop looking at one thing to focus on another. In other words, the writer was using the word to say stop being distracted by the things you easily look at and lock in on Jesus. The idea is to be like the horses in a race. They put blinders on the horse to keep it from being distracted by the other horses or the crowd so it can focus on looking straight ahead. This verse tells us to put our blinders on and look at Jesus.

We start with focusing on Jesus. Let's make him the model for how we live. It's interesting that we claim to believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, making him smarter, more admirable, more ideal than any other human who has ever lived. Then we pick other people to emulate. That tells me that somewhere inside we really don't believe that Jesus is smarter and knows more about life than anyone

else. We give lip service to the idea that Jesus knows best but then we look for other people to show us how to live. We should focus our attention totally on him.

That's hardly news to believers in Jesus. But there's a particular way the author wanted us to emulate the Lord. It was in the way he lived when "for the joy set before him he endured the cross." Jesus could easily have been distracted. In John 6:1-13 you can see the story of Jesus miraculously feeding a crowd of thousands of people. This was a very popular miracle. It was like free In-N-Out burgers for everybody. A little of that can make you very popular. In John 6:14-15 the apostle tells us, "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself." If they'd had an election that day Jesus would have won 95% of the popular vote. A few Pharisees would have voted against him, probably some Sadducees as well, but that would have been all. Everybody else was convinced. Forget welfare programs. Jesus is going to give free food for everybody. Has anyone ever had a campaign promise that could compete with that? I don't think so. Did you notice that they weren't just asking him to consider it? They were going to "make him king by force." He was going to have no choice. King Jesus whether you like it or not.

He was at the height of his popularity. It had to feel good. Why not take the throne and forget the whole die on the cross plan? After all, the throne was rightfully his. Think of what he could do. Yet Jesus' response was to go away by himself. Why? Because he wanted to tune out those voices that offered him the easy way. He focused on what the Father had given him to do.

You also know the negative side of that coin when people had turned against him. Just before he was arrested Luke 22:42 tells us that he prayed "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." The easy way out was looking good and the hard road of the cross was looking terrifying. Yet he did not waver. He looked at the joy on the other side of the cross and said, "yet not my will but yours be done."

The author tells us to get target lock on Jesus, to focus in on him and follow his example of being so riveted by the goal that the Father has set before us that it blocks out everything else. It is to be the motivate in everything that we do.

APPLICATION

LOSE THE FEAR

In Isaiah 35:4 God told the prophet this, “say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come.’” Tell those with fearful hearts that they should not fear. Yeah, but isn’t that precisely the problem? They have fearful hearts. They’re afraid. What good does it do to say, “don’t be afraid”? How do you just stop being afraid?

Oh, we just listen to Rick Myatt because he’s a fearless, hair-on-fire, risk taking, death defying, wild man. The man doesn’t have a nervous bone in his body. Um, yeah, not so much. I recently read a book entitled *Fearless*. It is the powerful story of Adam Brown, a larger than life Navy Seal. Adam early on fought a terrible addiction to drugs, but he put his faith in Jesus and was able to overcome that addiction. He went on to become one of the elite of the elite, a member of Seal Team Six. The book is appropriately titled because this guy was absolutely fearless. At one point he told his wife that even in the most ferocious combat he felt no fear. She told him that very fact frightened her. This guy was literally afraid of nothing. Here’s where my problem comes in. He was tragically killed in combat in Afghanistan. I have this sense that people without fear have a tendency to end up that way. Most of us have no idea what it would be like to be fearless like Adam. How are we supposed to lose our fears that feel so real and strong?

First we must note Isaiah’s message. “Be strong, do not fear, your God will come.” He went on to say, “He will come to save you.” In the end defeating fear is a matter of faith. Do we really believe God is there, that he is working for our good, working his good will in our lives? Do we really believe that he can be trusted to do what is best for us? If we do then we can begin to hand him our fears whatever they may be.

On Maui at Kaanapali Beach there’s this rocky point that people sometimes jump off into the ocean. From a distance it doesn’t look all that high. I’ve never jumped off it because it’s difficult to climb over lava rocks to get to it. But it is obvious that while it may not appear that high when you get up on top of it you discover from that vantage point it looks a lot higher. It looks uncomfortably high. One day several people went up to jump off. One girl got up there and froze. She just couldn’t do it. She backed away. A friend jumped and from the water yelled out how fun it was. Encouraged, she tried again. She froze again. It was too scary. Again she backed off. Her friends encouraged her so she tried again. She stood

there, obviously frightened by the prospect of taking the plunge. By this time she had attracted a lot of attention. Snorkelers and swimmers in the water stopped to watch. People gathered on the beach. Many were calling out encouragement to her telling her she could do it. By this time she had an audience of hundreds of people. Finally she jumped and a huge cheer went up from the crowd around the beach. She came up with a huge grin on her face.

I thought about that girl. We all know that fear. But the truth is, it's irrational. What do you think is going to happen? Is there water down there? Yes. Is the water going to catch you? Yes. Is it going to hurt you? No. It's going to be just fine. She jumped, and sure enough, she was just fine. Is God there for you? Yes. Does he care about you? Yes. Is he going to catch you? Yes. So take the plunge!

A second factor in overcoming our fear is precisely what this passage has told us to do, which is to focus in on the prize the way Jesus did. You all know that on people's list of greatest fears is speaking in public. Suppose for a moment that one happens to be high on your list. You hate the spotlight. Furthermore, suppose for a moment that there is something you fear worse than speaking in public. That would be *singing* in public. Your family has banned you from singing in the shower because they fear the neighbors will think you are torturing the family dog. You now this and are deathly self conscious about it. Now let's also suppose that you are offered an absurd deal by some unusual individual. He wants you to go on television and sing the powerful song "God On High" from *Les Miserable* as a solo. You know that people will ridicule you. You will be a national laughingstock if you do such a thing.

But let's also suppose that this strange individual promises to pay you \$10 million to do it. Do you think you could overcome your fears? I could. I wouldn't even have to think twice about it. Let them laugh. I'll laugh with them, all the way to the bank. So what happened there? There was something more important to me than my fear. Yes, my big fear would be realized, but compared to what I would get the fear simply didn't matter.

When we care about being like Jesus, when fulfilling God's calling in our lives is what matters most to us it will overcome our fears, no matter what they are. Yes, we still will feel the fear, but we will be motivated to ignore it and put it away because something is so much more important to us.

HAVE LASER VISION

Both of my kids earlier this year went to a place called Global Laser Vision where a doctor used a laser to reshape their eyes so they can see better. That's not the kind of laser vision I mean. I mean having vision that is like a laser that cuts through all the extraneous stuff that clouds our world and looks only at the "one thing" like Paul did.

What we need is a grasp of what our lives are to be about that is so sharp, so clear it will enable us to cut through all the confusion and the garbage of this world. We need to have something that we can use to test everything that comes into our lives, that we can ask, "will this help me accomplish the calling of my life or will it hinder?" We need to ask, "will this help me run the race to my finish line more efficiently or will it slow me down or trip me up?" In 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul wrote, "everything is permissible" – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible – but not everything is constructive."

Do you know what your life is about? Can you state it? Sometimes our biggest problem is we just don't know where we're going and what we're doing. If we're going to be aerodynamic we need to know what is essential to accomplishing our task and get rid of everything else. I believe God has called me to help people know and love God's truth and experience the grace of Jesus Christ. That begins with my own family then extends to every person I encounter. That's just mine. You need to ask God to make yours clear to you.

One way to be more aerodynamic is to reduce your guiding principles of life, those that determine everything else, to a very few. I have just three that I try to apply to everything in life:

- I live for God's kingdom, not mine
- The grace of Jesus Christ is life, anything else is death
- God calls me to love him and love people with his love

Let's become clear on what our lives are about and let's get spiritually aerodynamic as we follow our Lord Jesus Christ!