
The Joy Before Him

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

When we think of the horrible terrors of the cross, our minds immediately race to the attitude of Jesus Himself toward His death. As He approached that event, how did He think about it? How did Jesus prepare Himself mentally for the awful experience of crucifixion? Hebrews 12:2 says that He was “the author”—the beginner or progenitor—of our faith and “the perfecter,” the One who finalized and completed our faith. He created the place where we stand from start to finish.

One arresting feature of this verse is its answer to the question “What kind of mindset did it take for Jesus to complete this redemption for us?” This insightful verse tells us that He focused on “the joy set before Him.” In other words, He looked to the salvation that would come from what He was about to undergo for us. He concentrated on the great good that His suffering would bring to the world.

A woman who is expecting a baby finds encouragement and strength by looking beyond the pain of the actual childbirth that she knows lies ahead of her to the child who will enter the world. We could say of her, “Who for the joy of holding a newborn child that is set before her endures the pain of childbirth and cares little for the hardships of delivery.” A cancer patient who must undergo an extensive operation agrees to face trauma, pain, and rehabilitation because of the health that he hopes it will bring. He does not dwell upon its frightening possibilities, its inconvenience, or the struggle of convalescence; rather, he envisions the new life that will arise from it. We could say of him,

“Who for the joy of renewed health that is set before him endures the trauma of surgery and does not worry about the rehabilitation that must follow.” In a similar way, this text says that “. . . for the joy set before Him,” Jesus went to the cross. Instead of being possessed by its terror, He anticipated its triumph.

Focusing on the gain, He endured the pain. This text says that He “endured the cross.” Under-score in your mind the word “endured.” It is a word that means “to bear patiently” (ὑπομένω, *hupomeno*). Jesus came into the world to be crucified. The shadow of sacrificing Himself for our sins fell across His whole life. When He arose each morning, He knew that this new day brought Him closer to His crucifixion. He began and continued His earthly ministry with the realization that it would culminate in His violent and excruciating death. When He passed by some criminal who was being executed by crucifixion in public view and was still lingering in agony, more dead than alive, Jesus perhaps looked at him and thought, “That type of death is My destiny. For this purpose I have come into the world.”

How did Jesus handle the realization of His coming death? How did He prepare Himself to face it? Hebrews 12:2 enables us to look into Jesus’ mind. We see how He formulated His attitude. He looked at “the joy set before Him.” The “joy” mentioned embraces the celebration of salvation that the cross would bring to a world of sinners. Jesus knew that He would bring many sons to glory through His death. Maybe He pictured the redeemed of all the

ages gathering around God's throne, praising God for His grace and the eternal life received through Jesus' death.

This joy that sustained Him was "set before Him." In God's great eternal purpose, the joy had already been put into place. It was fixed before Him, ordained to occur. Although it was not visible to the physical eyes, it was a surety that existed beyond the sufferings. It was as certain as the promises of God. Jesus saw it clearly through His understanding of God's purpose and through His acceptance of God's great plan.

Focusing on the gain, He "despis[ed] the shame." Jesus knew that the cross would bring humiliation and mockery. He was aware that He would be lowered to the level of a common criminal. He would be cursed, spat upon, and made into a public spectacle. The text uses the word *καταφρονέω* (*kataphroneo*, "to despise"). This means that Jesus refused to give the shame of the cross any respect. He would not place any value or emphasis on the humiliation of the cross by thinking about it. Instead, He would look beyond that to the glory, the abundant and everlasting life that His death would procure for those who would believe and obey His gospel.

History records repeated instances of this scenario: A small army marches out to do battle with their enemies, knowing that they cannot defeat them on the battlefield. They only hope that they can triumph in other ways: They may occupy enemy troops and gain precious time for their comrades on another battlefield, enabling them to end the war. With courage that looks beyond the shame of defeat, they willingly sacrifice themselves so that a greater battle, or the war itself, can be won. The age-old prophecy of Genesis 3:15, the first foregleam of the gospel, predicted that Satan would bruise Christ's heel but Christ would bruise his head. Jesus did not concentrate upon how He would be bruised, as painful and

shameful as that might be; rather, He looked to the deathblow that His pain and shame would deliver to Satan.

Jesus looked to the joy instead of focusing on the cross. In this thought, we see Jesus' purity and righteousness. What kind of mindset does a truly righteous person have? He is focused upon joy. Even in the face of the worst that our minds can imagine, Jesus had an elevated view of His life, work, and God's eternal purpose. He did not look at the hardship, pain, and suffering; instead, He filled His mind with glory, goodness, and grace. He focused upon the triumph, not upon the thorns.

Much of the good in life lies beyond the valley of suffering. We have to walk through Golgotha to get to the garden of the resurrection. Jesus illustrates that we are to fill our minds with Sunday's empty tomb instead of Friday's occupied cross.

We must learn to live with tomorrow's grace in our hearts. Abraham did not let the nomadic lifestyle bother him, "for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10). Moses cast his life and future with the people of God, to suffer as they suffered, "for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:26b). Paul looked to the crown of righteousness that awaited him on the other side of execution (2 Timothy 4:8). Jesus looked beyond the pain and even the shame to the good and the glory that would come from His cross.

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Beyond the cross, Jesus could see His glorious church. After His suffering, He would sit down at God's right hand, welcoming many sons into eternal glory. Beyond the pain and the shame that we must suffer lies eternal life, the land of fadeless day. Jesus exemplifies the life-saving trait of looking to the good instead of dwelling on the bad.