

## “Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus”

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Hebrews 12:1-3

[NIV](#) | [Heb 12:1](#) 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. [2](#) 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. [3](#) Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

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Last week I had the privilege to travel with a group of pastors and mission-minded folks to Turkey [\[1\]](#) Turkey is a fascinating place, especially for Christians. It is the cradle of our faith:

This land was the birthplace of the Apostle Paul, the focus of his missionary journeys and the site of some of the earliest Christian churches. Paul spent three years in Ephesus in what is now Western Turkey, walking these streets [\[2\]](#). He is thought to have rented a room in this library to train leaders for the church [\[3\]](#). He proclaimed the gospel in this very theatre and caused a riot [\[4\]](#). Ephesus is also the home of the Apostle John, the city from which he wrote his gospel and his burial place has been identified.

Turkey was also the center of the eastern Christian church. This church in Istanbul [\[5\]](#), the Aya Sophia, built by the Emperor Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was literally the center of Christendom for a 1,000 years [\[6\]](#). There is also some pretty good shopping in Turkey! [\[7\]](#).

But the main reason for our journey to Turkey was to meet Turkish pastors and Christian workers in the field to get a better understanding of what God is doing there and to explore ways we can come alongside and encourage Turkish believers. Here are just a few of the people we met [\[pictures of pastors and workers - 8,9,10,11,12,13\]](#):

I have to say I came away in awe of these folks, who are laboring so faithfully for the Lord despite tremendous pressures and resistance.

It is ironic that the very country that was the cradle of Christianity should now be home to so few Christians [\[14\]](#). Today the body of Christians in Turkey is less than 0.1% of the population of 72 million. While there are a few very small ethnic bodies of Christian heritage within Turkey (Greeks, Armenians), the country is over 98.9 % Muslim. Until very recently, the Turks have never had a church of their own. Considering their long history, that's pretty remarkable!

It is sobering to think that in a country of 72 million people, there are, according the best estimates, 3500 evangelical Protestant Christians. There are about 110 churches— most of them very small (12 people or less). As I mentioned last week, there are many cities of 1,000,000 people or more where there are no Christians at all.

As one of our mission workers in Turkey put it, when it comes to sowing the seeds of the good news about Jesus in Turkey, “the road is really hard.” It’s as if the seed is falling on pavement.

Although Turkey is officially a secular country and guarantees religious freedom, the culture is so thoroughly Islamic, that to be anything other than Muslim is thought to be downright unpatriotic. It is a given that if you are a Turk, then you are a Muslim. A Turkish Christian is an oxymoron. To become a Christian immediately puts you under suspicion of being “anti-Turkish” and that somehow you are in league with foreign sources that want to divide the country up. (You may remember that Pastor Ramazan, the pastor of our sister church in Antalya, was accused of being a spy for George Bush.) Or if you are a Christian, it is assumed that you are being duped and manipulated by some foreign missionary. In Turkey, missionaries and terrorists are lumped together as threats to national security.

What’s more, Turkish culture is relational and shame based. You are taught to honor above all the values of your family. In the Turkish mind, to become a Christian is to turn your back on your family and to everything the family holds dear. Indeed, you bring shame to your family. As a result, many Turkish Christians have been disowned by their parents and siblings. Most of the people in our Antalya sister church have been so disowned, and the church has become their new family.

Christians are also treated like second-class citizens. Your religion is stated on your national ID card. If your ID card reads “Christian” your employment prospects are immediately diminished and you are excluded from government jobs.

Add to this a lot of negative press about Christianity in the Turkish media – some of it quite vicious, feeding irrational prejudices and sowing seeds of confusion.

All this makes for tough going as Turkish Christians seek to share the light of God’s love in Jesus Christ to the people around them. A couple of years ago opposition became violent as ultra-nationalists brutally murdered three Turkish Christians leaders in Malatya, in eastern Turkey – one of them was Pastor Ramazan’s good friend. You may remember that there was a foiled attempt on Ramazan’s life and Ramazan was placed under around the clock police protection.

And yet in spite of all this, Turkish pastors and our folks who do mission work in Turkey continue on faithfully, sharing the good news of Jesus, even though outwardly they seem to get few results that we would consider to be ‘marks of success’. Nothing is happening that we would call ‘spectacular’ in terms of numbers. The churches are not growing leaps and bounds. There are no mega churches in Turkey. People aren’t standing in line to be baptized. People who make professions of faith do not always stick with it and fall away. The culture remains hard to crack. But that doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit is not at work! The Spirit empowers these believers in amazing ways. They are persevering and bold! These Turkish Christians keep on keeping on, serving the Lord, preaching the word in season and out, worshiping together, caring for people, sharing good news in spite of all the pressure and resistance. They are content to reach one person at a time.

Of course, they get discouraged and grow weary. They covet our prayers for strength. But their quality of endurance and their staying power is simply amazing.

As I have thought about these Turkish brothers and sisters in the Lord, this passage from Hebrews 12:1-3 kept coming to my mind:

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. 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

What is amazing to me about these Turkish Christians is the degree to which they have been able to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus, in spite of all the opposition and pressure. They know who they are and whose they are. They know what their mission is, and they allow nothing to distract or divert them from that mission. They keep their eyes on Jesus and look to *his* great example, *“who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.”* Think of all that Jesus had to go through – the opposition he faced, the spiritual battles he waged, the physical suffering he endured. Jesus stopped at nothing to carry out his mission to redeem the world. And Turkish Christians share that same resolve to be about his mission – no matter what.

They understand their life and ministry as something like a race – a marathon race, if you will – it is a grueling race that must be run with patience and perseverance. And they know that in this race you have to keep your eyes on the goal – not on the obstacles that lie in the path.

Our Turkish brothers and sisters in Christ are also mindful of that “great cloud of witnesses” – the saints and heroes of the faith who ran the race before them, now looking down from heaven, cheering them on, shouting encouragement. We can imagine the Apostle Paul, who first preached to the peoples of that region 2,000 years ago, shouting down his encouragement from heaven upon his spiritual children....

And so for me, as I have said, I am in awe of these Turkish pastors and faithful disciples, who keep on following Jesus, under tough conditions with few outward results. Yet, they know the Holy Spirit is with them, and they know that if they keep on persevering in the Lord’s work, their efforts will bear fruit, and they too will share the victor’s crown and will share in the Master’s joy.

Since these Turkish Christians are our brothers and sisters in the Lord – since they are family – let us pray for them and to encourage them as best we can. Through our mission budget we are supporting our sister church in Antalya, Turkey [16] as they look to one day purchasing some land and constructing a church building – a very important step in Turkish culture to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the people. It will be the first church building in this city of over one million people. And we are pleased to have a personal relationship with Ramazan and Karen , who have visited us a couple of times. I hope Ramazan can visit us one more time in November before he returns to Turkey permanently and share more of what God is doing in Turkey. I hope we can foster relationships with other Christian workers in that country as well.

The mission field may be as hard as pavement in Turkey, but there are some green shoots coming up through the cracks. There are signs of great hope. Christian congregations may be small, but they are growing in number, and new efforts are being made to plant churches in cities. The Antalya church is hoping to plant a church in a nearby city where previously there was no Christian church.

In all things, they look to Jesus show them the way. Their eyes are fixed upon the Lord.

How about us a world away in Mukilteo? Are our eyes fixed upon the Lord?

We, too, have our challenges and our obstacles that would trip us up. The life Christ calls us to live is a difficult one – though our challenges are different than in Turkey. It's not easy caring for your neighbor who gives so little to you in return. It's not easy loving your enemy. It's not easy persevering in prayer when the answers don't seem forthcoming. It's not easy standing up for your convictions when others oppose you. It's not easy being a Christian in today's business world where the temptation is always there to cut a few ethical corners to make a profit. It is not easy to stay true to Christ when all kinds of false goals attract us.

In fact, it's almost more difficult to be a Christian here, where it is almost too easy ; we grow soft and complacent, distracted by all sorts of competing beliefs and philosophies, and where there a thousand and one activities to keep us so busy we have no time to ask questions about life's meaning and purpose. There is something about persecution and suffering that focuses one's discipleship; we face nothing like that here in this country.

Jesus himself blazed the trail of faith for us by virtue of his own obedience and perseverance. He finished the course and now he is both our guide and goal. You and I have to look away from everything else to him, if we want to run well.

Do you find it difficult living for Christ? Is your faith being challenged by life's events? Are the circumstances of your life getting you down? Are you discouraged and bogged down by the pressures around you. Do you wish you could just drop out of the race? You and I can look to the example of those Turkish believers and all they have to deal with. More importantly, we have the example of Jesus himself. Listen again to the author of Hebrews, reading this time a more modern translation from Eugene Peterson:

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

We are in this race that is the Christian life to the end. Let us finish well....