

A Study of the Book of Hebrews

Jesus is Better

Sermon # 22

“The Race of Life”

Hebrews 12:1-3

The scene that is set in Hebrews 12 is that of a Track and Field event. The runners have gathered and the event is about to begin. We read in verse one, *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (2) looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”*

There can be little doubt that the “cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (v. 1) are those who have just been described in the earlier part of Chapter eleven as who have through faith have faced all kinds of difficulty. Leon Morris suggests that the language may refer to a relay race, in which the “witnesses” are those who have already finished their leg of the race and have passed the baton on to US. [Leon Morris. EBC p 133]

The heavenly arena is filled with those who have gone on before. The question is are they “witnesses” in sense that are watching and cheering for the contestants or are they witnesses in the sense that

they have left examples for us to follow. Although it may be encouraging to believe that it is both. The word "*witnesses*" does not mean spectators. It is a word from which we get the English word "martyr." They are witnesses to us that God can see us through. Think for a moment about who is there.

Abel is there, having offered a better sacrifice, a sacrifice offered with an attitude of faith.

Abraham is there, a man who was willing to leave the land of his father's and follow God's command to go to a country that he had never seen before.

Enoch is there, a man not known for his impressive accomplishments but rather for his walk with God.

Noah is there, the man who trusted God enough, to withstand the ridicule of his neighbors and obey God's command to spend 120 years building a boat on dry land

Mighty Moses is there, who led Israel out of slavery in Egypt and delivered the Ten Commandments, he stands with the shine of having been in the presence of God still upon his countenance.

Before we consider what this passage has to say, I need to make one matter very clear. The race is not in order to get to heaven and only those who win get in. What every original reader understood is that one do not get to compete unless they were a citizen. Our citizenship in heaven is settled the moment we accept Jesus as our Savior. We are as sure of heaven at that moment as well will be when our life is over and we are escorted into His presence.

Now the moment of our race has come. The writer encourages us that if we are to run a good race there are four things we must do!

First, We Must Lay Aside Every Hindrance (v. 1) "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us..."

- Lay aside every weight. *"Let us lay aside every weight..."*

When it speaks of laying aside "every weight" the "weight" (*onkos*) is not bad or evil in itself it is simply something which weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our strength or dampens our enthusiasm for the things of God.

"The army of Alexander the Great was advancing on Persia. At one critical point, it appeared that his troops might be defeated. The soldiers had taken so much plunder from their previous campaigns that they had become weighted down and were losing their effectiveness in combat. Alexander immediately commanded that all the spoils be thrown into a heap and burned.

The men complained bitterly but soon came to see the wisdom of the order. Someone wrote, "It was as if wings had been given to them—they walked lightly again." Victory was assured." [Our Daily Bread, July 3, 1991 -www.bible.org/illus./Hebrews]

Wilbur Chapman said, "The rule of my life is this: Anything that dims my vision of Christ, or takes away my taste for Bible study, or cramps my prayer life or makes Christian word difficult, it is wrong for me, and as a Christian I must turn from it!"

- Lay aside every sin. *"... and the sin which so easily ensnares us."*

An even more significant hindrance to Christian living is sin. Since the writer uses a definite article "*the sin*" he seems to be referring to the specific sin(s) each of us, individually is most likely to commit. What is the sin that so easily entangles you or me? Is it that we are jealous of what someone else has? Is it envy? It is a Critical spirit? Is it hatred? Is it lust? Pride? Whatever sin it is, it must be stripped off and left behind!

The Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter, wrote, "*It is a most lamentable thing to see how most people spend their time and their energy for trifles, while God is cast aside. He who is all seems to them as nothing, and that which is nothing seems to them as good as all. It is lamentable indeed, knowing that God has set mankind in such a race where heaven or hell is their certain end, that they should sit down and loiter, or run after the childish toys of the world, forgetting the prize they should run for. Were it but possible for one of us to see this business as the all-seeing God does, and see what most men and women in the world are interested in and what they are doing every day, it would be the saddest sight imaginable. Oh, how we should marvel at their madness and lament their self-delusion!*

If God had never told them what they were sent into the world to do, or what was before them in another world, then there would have been some excuse. But it is His sealed word, and they profess to believe it." [Richard Baxter -www.bible.org/illus./Hebrews]

Not Only Must We Lay Aside Every Hindrance but...

Second, We Must Run With Endurance

(v. 1) *"...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."*

The writer compares the Christian life to a foot race, but it is an marathon not a sprint! The word "race" used here (*agon*) is the word we get our English word "agonize" from. As with any footrace it doesn't matter how fast you start, if you don't finish. In 2 Timothy 4:7-8 the Apostle Paul says, *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (8) Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."*

Hebrews 12:1 tells us to "run with endurance" the race set before us. "Endurance" (hupomone) is the steady determination to keep going. It means continuing when everything in you wants to slow down or give up! George Matheson wrote, "We commonly associate patience with lying down.... Yet there is a patience that I believe to be harder - the patience that can run. To lie down in the time of grief, to be quiet under the stroke of adverse fortune, implies a great strength; but I know of something that implies a strength greater still: it is the power to work under stress; to have a great weight at your heart and still run; to have a deep anguish in your spirit and still perform the daily tasks. It is a Christlike thing! The hardest thing is that most of us are called to exercise our patience, not in the sickbed but in the street." To wait is hard, to do it with "good courage" is harder!" [Our Daily Bread, April 8 -www.bible.org/illus./Hebrews]

So the writer is telling us, it is time to run! Some of you today, may be coasting or panting on the sidelines. It is time to run! Some

of you may be complaining about the condition of the race. It is time to run! Some of you are out of shape spiritually and ready to offer excuses for your sluggishness. But it is time to get up and run!

The writer is saying, *"If you are not a Christian, get in the race, because you cannot win if you don't enter you can't win!" "If you're a Christian, run with endurance and don't give up!"*

Not Only Must We Run With Endurance but ...

Third, *We Must Shift Our Focus (v.2)*

"... looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

We are to deliberately lift our eyes from those things which might distract us and focus with utter concentration on Jesus. The word *"looking"* comes from a Greek word (*aphorao*) that has the idea of concentrating your gaze. It means to look away from other things so that you can focus all your attention on one object. It is the picture of a lost child walking alone down a carnival midway, enthralled by the lights and sounds and smells. Her eyes flit this way and that. She doesn't even realize that she is danger. Suddenly through all the surrounding noise she hears her mother's voice. Looking up, she sees her mother calling for her to come. With her eyes now fixed on her mother, she walks straight ahead, ignoring everything else. Soon she is safe by her mother's side. In much the same way a coach will tell his runners, "When the gun sounds, start running as hard as you can. Don't look back. Don't look around. Keep your eyes on the finish line and keep on running."

As the old hymn says, *"Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in his wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace."* ["Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." Helen Lemmel. Praise! Our Songs and Hymns." # 284 (Grand Rapids: Singspiration Music, 1979)]

We are to focus on Jesus as our *"author"* (*archegos* – literally pioneer) of our faith. Jesus is both the initiator and the completer of our faith.

Not Only Must We Shift Our Focus but ...

Fourth, We Are To Consider the Savior

(v. 3) *"For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls."*

The story is told that, *"Two gas company service men, a senior training Supervisor and a young trainee were out checking meters and parked their truck at the end of the alley and worked their way to the other end. At the last house a woman looking out her kitchen window watched the two men as they checked her gas meter. As they finished the meter check the older supervisor challenged his younger co-worker to a foot race down the alley back to the truck."*

As they came running up to the truck, they realized that the lady from the last house was huffing and puffing right behind them. They stopped and asked her what was wrong. Gasping for breath she said, "When I see two gas men running full speed away from my house, I figured I had better run too." [Contributed by: Stan Martin – www.

SermonCentral/Illustrations]

Many of us as Christians understand that we should be running the race but I wonder if we are a lot like this woman, we are running but we don't know why!

The last thing we are going to do is "*consider*" our motivation. When we are asked to "*consider*" Jesus in verse three it means to make a careful reckoning by comparing. The reader is asked to compare their suffering and hardships with His. The sufferings of Christ's followers, however, severe they may be, are always incomparably light when weighted against the suffering of the Master Himself.

So let me say it again, the writer is saying, "*If you are not a Christian, get in the race, because you cannot win if you don't enter you can't win!*" "*If you're a Christian, run with endurance and don't give up!*"