

RUNNING IN THE SPIRITUAL OLYMPICS

Hebrews 12:1-4

Have you ever watched the Olympics on television? These games have a history of more than twenty-five hundred years. The best amateur athletes from all over the world are there to compete. This type of athletic contest provides the background for our text. As the climax of the great discussion of faith, we are told that every Christian is running in the spiritual Olympics. Life is compared with a race. Each Christian is running in the race. The secret of victory in this race is the faith this book calls for so clearly.

Comparing the Christian life to a race suggests a number of interesting insights. I would surely remind us that there is more to being a Christian than making a decision for Christ. The race figure surely reminds us that the Christian life is a life involvement. It also suggests progress. There is a point of beginning and there is a goal. Because it can give us some new insight into our position in the Christian life, let us look carefully at this passage.

WE ARE RUNNING BEFORE A GREAT CROWD OF WITNESSES

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with such a great cloud of witnesses." This is an impressive thing. The whole Greek population turned out to view the spectacle in the first years of its running. The events of the Olympics in our day are before vast crowds of witnesses, including vast television audiences from the nations around the world. The writer of Hebrews is aware of a vast cloud of witnesses. "Cloud" would indicate that their number is actually innumerable. They literally are surrounding the runners in the race. The stadium is full of the witnesses --- not a seat is empty.

Who are the witnesses? They are the great names listed in the Hall of Fame for Faith. Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Noah, Sarah, Moses, Joseph, Jacob --- they are all there with many, many more. While the words used allows us to believe that they are watching the running of the race with special interest, the word "witness" is not the word for a spectator. The emphasis is upon testimony rather than watching. We are literally surrounded with a cloud of people shouting at us testimonies. Each of those surrounding us have already run the race. They are former participants in the race. They have finished their race and have taken seats to watch us. They are shouting at us the encouragements we need.

We need to listen to them. As we read the Old Testament, or the New Testament, we need to listen to the testimony of the people of faith. They would encourage us to keep on running, to run victoriously.

There is this dimension to the Christian life which we are liable to miss. The tendency is to feel isolated and alone in the running of the race. But just as the runner in the

Olympics is aware of the great names of the past who have run before him, and of their achievements, so we should be aware that we are following in the tracks of the great spiritual giants of the past. Their example and testimony should spur us on.

WE ARE RUNNING AFTER SOME THOROUGH PREPARATION

In the Olympics training and discipline are the order of the day. Every participant in every sport will be there only after a long period of thorough preparation. He will have been prepared mentally, emotionally, and physically for the event. In light of the race we are running, there is a call for our thorough preparation. "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us."

"Every weight" could in the understanding of the runner mean just that. The participant in the races in the Olympics lines up with not one extra ounce of weight on his body. His body has been brought down to a disciplined level. However the word literally means "encumbrance". It is anything that will impede the running of the athlete. In the application of the Holy Spirit in our text it refers to anything that will hinder us from the living a victorious Christian life. The "weights" can even be the good things of life. Many Christians stumble in the running of the race because they never discover the difference between the good and the best. Everything must be evaluated in light of its effect on your running of the race of life. Will this hinder my Christian living in any way? Will I be able to be a better Christian if I leave this off? Many good things will have to be laid aside if you are to ever run successfully in the spiritual Olympics.

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We will also have to lay aside the sin which doth so easily beset us. Some have understood this to be a reference to our favorite sin. While it is true that the favorite sin must be abandoned, actually all sin must be abandoned. "Besetting" really suggests that the sin encircles, or hinders. It becomes that which trips the runner. Can you imagine a participant in the Olympics trying to run in a bathrobe. It would always be tripping him. This is what the Christian who tolerates some sin in his life is doing. The sin will always be besetting him.

The specific sin the writer had in mind may have been the sin of unbelief. He uses a definite article as though he was thinking of a definite sin. It was the sin the people who received this letter were having the most problems with. It may be something else in your life. Whatever it is, if you are to run victoriously in the spiritual Olympics, it must be laid aside. No excuses will do. Many of you are stumbling along in the race because of your refusal to deal finally with some sin in your life. This is the necessary preparation for running.

WE ARE RUNNING AS A TEST OF ENDURANCE

"Endurance" is a key to victory. "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us."
"Let us run" means let us keep on running. We are to continue running without any let up in our Christian lives. But it is to be through or with patience. The word patience carries in the idea of enduring or persevering. Nothing is to deter us from running the Christian race in the spiritual Olympics.

The spiritual Olympics is usually a marathon type race. It is long, and is beset with difficulties. This letter was written to a group of Christians who were tempted to quit. They had entered the race, had run well for a little while, but some of them were now ready to pitch in the towel. They were about to decide that the whole thing was not worth the cost.

To inspire us to endure, the writer reminds us of the supreme example of faith. "Looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now set down on the right hand of the throne of God." "Author" means that He is the leader of faith. It does not suggest that He is originator of our faith as much as He is the one who has gone before us in faith. He is the supreme example of faith. While the names of the Old Testament remind us of faith, the supreme revelation of the faith life is in the experience of the Lord Jesus. By faith He endured even the cross, while despising the shame of it. As a result of His endurance, He is now seated permanently at the right hand of the throne of God in the heavens. The writer adds, "For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds." If you are beginning to feel like giving up the race, think upon Him for a while. The writer rebukes us, "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin."

Have you ever wondered why the Lord has not taken you to heaven? If it is His ultimate intention to take you to heaven, why does He leave you here so long? A part of the reason is that you are left here to test your endurance. Do you have the kind of faith that can run for a long time in the race of life? Will your faith give out if confronted with some contradictions from sinners? Will opposition turn you back? Will suffering deter you? The long spiritual marathon will tell. The admonition is that we keep on running regardless of what may confront us.

WE ARE RUNNING FOR THE HONOR OF THE LORD JESUS

In the Olympics the participants are striving to bring honor to their respective countries. When the medals are bestowed, the winners will stand out in front of the throng, the national anthem of the country will be played, and the flag of the country will be raised. It is an inspiring, moving moment. In the first Olympics, the participants ran for the honor of the great Greek god Zeus. He was considered to be the supreme god.

Jesus is not only our supreme example in running by faith, He is also our supreme inspiration. We run for His honor. This is the reason we are always "looking away unto

Jesus". We want to endure whatever may come for the honor of the one who endured the Cross for us. This is the reason it is so important that you run well.

How are you running, brother? If you have committed your life to Jesus for salvation, you are running. It is just a question of how you are running. Let me appeal to you to run with all your heart. Let us take home some medals for the honor of the Lord Jesus. When the games of life are over, we should aspire to be standing front and center before the King of Kings. Run, brother, run!