

Let us Run the Race with Endurance!

For: Voice of the Church

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We live in a society filled with sports. People play sports, people watch sports on television, and people go to stadiums to watch sports events. The Greco-Roman world also valued sports. So when Hebrews 12:1 says "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...", the imagery was readily understood back then and it is readily understood today. The Christian is engaged in the race of faith!

The first readers of the letter to the Hebrews had to hear this, as do we. There are so many things tugging and pulling at Christians, that it is easy to become distracted in the race of faith and to stumble and fall. We may even give up on the race.

The initial readers of this letter were in danger of going back to Judaism and worshipping at the temple, offering the various sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. They were in danger of denying Christ as Saviour. Why? Because they faced opposition as Christians. They faced imprisonment and the plundering of their property (Heb. 10:32-36). And this made it tempting for them to deny Christ and go back to Judaism.

Christians today also face persecution in various forms. Sometimes it is outright persecution resulting in imprisonment or death, as is happening in some parts of the world today. Other times it is a subtler form of persecution by way of ridicule and marginalization. Either way, it puts Christians under pressure!

That's why the book of Hebrews has the well-known chapter 11, with its list of men and women who ran the race of faith with endurance. Abraham, the father of all believers, who went on a long journey to a country he did not know. Moses, who rejected the pleasures of Egypt and chose to be mistreated with God's people. Rahab, who gave cover to the men who spied out the promised land. And so many more! All these people faced ridicule and danger for the faith!

This is the "cloud of witnesses" of which Hebrews 12:1 speaks. They are called "witnesses" – not in the sense of people who saw something, but in the sense of people who confessed the faith. They bore "witness" to the faith, meaning that they testified to the faith. They stood up for the faith.

Those people are described as spectators of our race of faith. We are "surrounded" by them, says the writer, and this fits with the imagery of the race of faith. Picture yourself in a sports stadium as one of the athletes, and surrounding you is a great crowd of people. Those spectators are cheering you on in the race of faith! They are urging us to continue to confess the gospel even when it is difficult to do!

Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..." Every runner lays aside certain things in order to run better; no runner wants anything to get in the way of running the race. No runner runs with baggy layers of clothing; runners wear skin-tight outfits to prevent even wind resistance. It's a picture of self-discipline, it's a picture of intensity.

So many things in life can get in the way of running the race of faith. They are a “weight” (Heb. 12:1) which holds us back. Sometimes we are weighed down by various daily activities, that we hardly have time and energy for the things of the LORD. Those various activities which occupy us may all be good things in themselves, but they can hinder us in the race.

This requires self-discipline and time management. Maybe we have a career, a family, and a social life which require a lot of time and energy. So many things to look after and run after. And sometimes we are left wondering: Am I in the race of faith or in a rat race? As important as a career, a family, and a social life are, we must prioritize. We should not let those good things overtake our lives. And by prioritizing, we are removing the weight which hinders us in the race. Is it really necessary to attend one more meeting? Is it really necessary to have our kids in as many extra-curricular activities as possible that have us driving all over town? Is it really necessary to spend so much time on Facebook? Let’s carve out time for our spiritual development so that we can focus on running the race of faith! Make time to read the Bible and study it!

Sometimes it’s not *good* things that get in the way of running the race of faith, sometimes it’s *bad* things. The text also speaks about “...sin which clings so closely...” (Heb. 12:1). We are often drawn in by sinful things that cause us to stumble in the race of faith – things like materialism, lust, addictions, pride, and resentments toward other people. And certainly the desire for acceptance even at the expense of our faith is a sin which can cause us to cave in to the pressure to conform to the wishes of the society around us. All those sins can overtake our lives and weigh us down.

We need to be focused in the race of faith! Runners competing in a race are very focused; they focus on the finish line. Runners don’t let themselves get distracted. For the Christian, this means “...looking to Jesus...” as it says in Hebrews 12:2. Jesus Christ is described as “...seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). The finish line is in heaven! We must look heavenward!

When speaking of Jesus, Hebrews 12:2 elaborates by saying that Jesus is “...the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” This means that Jesus Christ is “...the perfect embodiment of faith...” (*NIV Study Bible* [Zondervan, 2002], note on Heb. 12:2). Christ believed perfectly. As such, Christ has shown us what faith really is. And because of his faith, Christ has obtained great gifts of salvation for us, which we may take hold of in faith. Moreover, as the founder and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ is the One who works and strengthens faith in our hearts. He does that through his Holy Spirit.

During his time on earth, the Saviour constantly kept his eye on the finish line. He focused on the joy set before him, and thus endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). Christ believed that the cross would bring salvation for God’s people! Christ believed that the cross would lead to the crown!

Implicit in this is that those who complete the race of faith will share in Christ’s victory! We will be in glory with Christ! We will be with our Saviour!

It may be a difficult race due to opposition. But our suffering as Christians is nothing compared to Christ’s suffering and shame on the cross. And remember that in Hebrews 12:3 the writer says, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Let us run the race of faith with endurance! As we do so, let us look to Jesus Christ for strength!
And let us look to Jesus Christ because where Christ is, that is where the finish line is!
