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STAY IN THE RACE

HEBREWS 12:1-2

By: H.B. Charles, Jr.



SERMON MANUSCRIPT

It was the opening round of the 1,500 meters in the 1972 Olympics of Munich. There were ten men on the track. But the focus was on one man. Jim Ryun, the world record holder, was undefeated for three years before he loss to Kenyan Kip Keino in 1968. The world awaited the rematch in 1972. But it would not happen. During third lap of the opening round, Ryun tripped over Billy Fordjour of Ghana. He lay of the track for at least eight seconds, while the other runners continued. Suddenly he sprang up and ran hard until he crossed the finish line. Although he came in tenth, Ryun received the loudest cheer from the crowd. He didn't qualify for a medal that day. But he did finish what he started.

This is the message of Hebrews 12:1-2: Don't stop running until you have finished the race of faith. This admonition was written to at-risk Jewish Christians. Religious persecution tempted them to forsake Christ. The writer exhorts them to continue in the faith, because Jesus is better than what they considered returning to. Most of this letter is exposition, in which the anonymous writer carefully explains the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ. But in chapter 12, the writer transitions from doctrinal explanation to practical exhortation. Our text begins this practical section of the letter. Here the writer describes the Christian life as a race. And he exhorts these troubled Christians to stay in the race until they reach the finish line.

Are you in the race? Only those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord qualify. The Christian race requires new life to participate. If you have not experienced the rescuing grace of God, run to the cross. Follow Jesus. Get in the race. The Christian race is not easy. But it is worth it. The race gives purpose to life, hope for the future, and a reward in glory. In athletics, only one can win a race. But in the Christian race, all who persevere to the end win. We do not compete against one another. We compete against the flesh, the world, and the devil. There are obstacles along the course that would cause you to slow down, turn back, and give up. But do not stop running until you have finished the race of faith. What does it take to stay in the race?

I. RUN WITH STEADFAST ENDURANCE

Hebrews 12:1-2 is one sentence. The primary clause of this sentence is at the end of verse 1: "and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." The word translated "race" is the word from which we get our word agony. The Christian race is a difficult marathon, not an easy sprint. It is a lifelong, long distance race that requires effort, struggle, and determination. So we must "run with endurance." Endurance is more than patience. Patience is passive resignation. But endurance is bearing under a heavy load for a long time. It is steady determination to keep going, regardless of the temptation to give up. It's staying power. Victorious faith is not like adrenaline that rises and falls. It is more like the heart that faithfully keeps beating no matter how you feel. This is how you finish the Christian race: "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." "Set before us" indicates the race takes place on a predetermined track. You cannot choose the course. God sovereignly maps it out. All Christians run on a predesigned track. And each Christian must stay in his or her lane. Other people's lane may easier or harder than yours. But that's not your business. You must run your own race. You cannot win if you do not stay the course set before us to the end.

On April 21, 1980, Cuban-American Rosie Ruiz was the declared the women's winner of the Boston Marathon. Her time of the 2:31:56 was the fastest women's time in the history of the Boston Marathon. It was also the third fastest women's time in any marathon. But her celebrated victory was short-lived. Suspicions immediately began to emerge when Bill Rodgers, who won his third straight Boston Marathon that day, could not remember seeing Ruiz during the race. No one recalled seeing her. And she could not be found in any pictures or video footage. Ruiz could not remember details of the race that were common knowledge to runners. And for just completing a marathon at a record time, she wasn't sweating or tired or anything. When a report asked her about it, she said, "I got up with a lot of energy this morning," which apparently helped finish twenty-five minutes faster than her reported time at the New York City Marathon just six months earlier. Eight days later, marathon directors stripped Ruiz of her title. And they proceeded to implement surveillance measures to ensure runners did not cheat the course.

God has always had a sovereign surveillance system to make sure no one is crowned who does not run with endurance the race that is set before us. Verse 1 gives two keys to running with steadfast endurance.

A. FOLLOW GOOD EXAMPLES

There is a principle of Bible interpretation called THE LAW OF FULL MENTION. To understand a subject, you should study the place where it is most fully addressed in scripture. Hebrews 11 is the full mention of faith. The chapter is often called THE FAITH HALL OF FAME. It is a list of Old Testament men and women who prevailed through faith. The readers were tempted to forsake to Christianity return to the legalistic system of the Old Testament economy. In chapter 11, the writer gives this roll call of faith heroes to make a compelling point. If you return to a system of works, you will not be joining the great men and women of the Old Testament, because they lived by faith, not by works.

- Abel demonstrates the faith that justifies.
- Enoch demonstrates the faith that sanctifies.
- Noah demonstrates the faith that testifies.
- Abraham demonstrates the faith of enterprise.
- Sarah demonstrates the faith that multiplies.
- Isaac demonstrates the faith that looks onward.
- Jacob demonstrates the faith that looks upward.
- Joseph demonstrates the faith that looks homeward.
- Moses' family demonstrate the faith of a mother.
- Moses demonstrates the faith of a man.
- Israel demonstrates the faith of a multitude.
- Rahab demonstrates the faith that receives.
- Many others demonstrate the faith that achieves.

Hebrews 11:39-40 says: "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." In these closing verses of chapter 11, the writer says that you should not try to go back to the system the Old Testament saints lived in because they lived by faith trying to reach the New Testament economy you live in. It is then the writer says in Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness..." The word "cloud" is used metaphorically here

to refer to a great number. We are surrounded by a mass company of witnesses.

The word "witnesses" can be read two ways. It may mean these Old Testament saints are witnesses looking down on us as we run our race. This idea is supported by the fact the verse says we are "surrounded" by them, as if we are on the track and they are in the stands of an arena. But there is a theological problem with this reading. The Bible does not directly teach that saints in heaven are aware of the happenings on earth. And a biblical doctrine of heaven does not leave room for the notion that one finishes his race and gets to heaven only to put into cosmic bleachers to watch us struggle through. Psalm 16:11 says: "You make known to me the path of life, in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

It is better to read "witnesses" to mean departed saints are testifiers, not observers. JAMES MOFFATT wisely comments: "It is what we see in them, not what they see in us, that is the writer's main point." The Old Testament saints that finished the race are witness-bearers that it is worth it to stay in the race. Abraham says, "If I can finish the race, you can make it." Isaac says, "If I can finish the race, you can make it." Rahab says, "If I can finish the race, you can make it." And this is not limited to the Old Testament saints mentioned in chapter 11. This is an affirmation of THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS. There have been saints throughout church history whose lives say to us, "If I can finish the race, you can make it." There are Christians around the world that have witnessed for Christ with their lives who say to us, "If I can finish the race, you can make it." For that matter, there are saints here who, though they have not yet finished the race, they have pressed through the quitting-points you are stuck in. And they can tell you, "If I have made it through, you can make it!" Run with steadfast endurance by following good examples.

B. PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

Verse 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." "Lay aside," is the picture of taking off old, soiled, or ruined garments. It is the same word used in James 1:21: "Therefore

put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” It is also used in 1 Peter 2:1: “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.” The writer of Hebrews uses it here in a grammatical emphasis that denotes decisive action. To run with steadfast endurance, there are two hindrances that you must lay aside once and for all.

LAY ASIDE EVERY WEIGHT. The word translated “weight” is only used here in the New Testament. The writer is not telling us to lose weight. The concern here is the race, not the training. In training, weights are essential for building up an athlete’s strength, speed, and stamina. But to carry weights during the race is ridiculous. Victorious runners travel light. In the ancient games, athletes would run virtually naked, wearing as little as possible. So we must lay aside every weight.

Weight is not sin, which is directly addressed in the next phrase. It is not that which is immoral. It is not wrong, in and of itself. It is morally neutral. It can even be a good thing. Yet it needs to be stripped off if it is a hindrance to your spiritual progress. JOHN MACARTHUR comments here: “The problem is not in what the weight is but in what it does. It keeps us from running well and therefore from winning.” A weight is whatever slows you down. It is whatever cools off your zeal for God. It is whatever dulls your appetite for the word of God. It is whatever becomes an easy excuse for you to miss church. It is whatever tempts you to compromise your values. What is your weight? Is it a hobby or possession or relationship or pleasure or entertainment? What is it? This is a personal question. You cannot answer this for anyone else. My weight may not be your weight. And your weight may not be my weight. Your weight is whatever person, place, or thing hinders you from running the Christian race with steadfast endurance. James 4:17 says, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

LAY ASIDE EVERY SIN. If we must lay aside every weight, how much more must we lay aside the sin that clings so closely! HARRY IRONSIDE wrote: “There is no saint so holy but that he realizes he has certain tendencies, which if allowed to control him, would lead to the breakdown of his testimony.” Indeed, every Christian is subject to temptation. We are saints with sinner problems. There is remaining sin that can trip us up if delivering grace does not keep us. Yet we cannot be victorious with a “let go and let God” mentality. We must take responsibility for our sins. When and where we identify sin in our lives, we must lay it aside. Big sins and little sins. Sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. Every sinful thought or word or activity must be stripped off once and for all.

Verse 2 tells us why we must not play with sin. It “clings so closely.” The Greek word used here is found nowhere else. And scholars grope in the dark for definition. It may best be rendered in the KING JAMES VERSION: “the sin which doth so easily beset us.” It is the sin that encompasses us until we are entangled in it. Think about it. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And we are surrounded by besetting sins. Will you follow the example of the faithful? Or will you go the way of sin? Beware of the sinfulness of sin. You cannot play with it and then sit it down. If you touch it, it will cling to you. Proverbs 5:22-23 says: “The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.”

II. RUN WITH UNDISTRACTED FOCUS

Many years ago, the GRAND TRUNK RAILROAD COMPANY sponsored a contest for a phrase to put on a sign at a railroad crossing. The \$2,500 prize money went to an entry that focused on three words: “Stop, Look, and Listen.” That slogan was later changed for signs that now read, “Railroad Crossing.” But for many years, those three simple words saved many lives. In Hebrews 12:2 there are three words that have even greater power to save lives: “looking to Jesus.” Chapter 11 is a roll call of spiritual heroes that finished the race. They are listed to encourage the reader to persevere. But the reader is not told to look to them. And they are not told to look to Jesus as another spiritual hero or even the supreme one. The writer says we should be “looking to Jesus.”

The word “looking,” translates a compound verb. It means to look away at something. It is to turn your gaze from everything else to focus on a specific thing. This is how we should fix our gaze on Jesus. It is not about ignoring every one else. It is about being so consumed with Jesus that everything else is put into proper perspective. In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul testifies, “Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” This is the only way to make it through this sinful world without losing the race. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Look to Jesus for salvation. Look to Jesus for direction. Look to Jesus for strength. Look to Jesus for encouragement. Look to Jesus for help. Look to Jesus because of who he is and what he has done.

A. WHO IS JESUS?

The writer uses the name “Jesus” here to affirm the humanity of Jesus. He does use CHRIST or LORD, to emphasize that Jesus is human being who knows our experience. Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Yet Jesus is more than a human being. Verse 2 ascribes a divine title to Jesus: “the founder and perfecter of our faith.” This reference to faith most likely points us back to Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hope for, the conviction of things not seen.”

JESUS IS THE FOUNDER OF OUR FAITH. Hebrews 2:10 says, “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Jesus is the founder of our salvation. In our text, the writer makes the same point by calling Jesus the founder of our faith. He is the author of our faith. He is the originator of our faith. He is the pioneer of our faith. Jesus is the trailblazer for believers to follow. Likewise, **JESUS IS THE PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH.** He is both the start and the end of the race. He is the one who brings our faith to its intended

conclusion. This passage is about the perseverance of the saints. But the perseverance of the saints is enabled by the preservation of the saints. It is not our endurance that guarantees we will finish the race. It is the fact that Jesus is the finisher of our faith. Philippians 1:6 says, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

B. WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Verse 2 says: “looking to Jesus, 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.” The writer describes the redemptive accomplishment of Jesus by highlighting his endurance and his enthronement.

REMEMBER THE ENDURANCE OF JESUS. Verse 2 says: “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” This is the only direct reference to the cross in the book of Hebrews. It was death by cruel and unusual punishment. So painful was crucifixion that a new term was coined to describe it: “excruciating.” This is the physical pain Jesus suffered on the cross. Yet more than that, Jesus suffered spiritual agony of the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is why we should look to Jesus. He “endured the cross, despising the shame.” Crucifixion was not just execution. It was propaganda. It was a way of saying this is what happens to those who cross the Roman Empire. So shameful was it that it was illegal to crucify Roman citizens. And Jews believed anyone who was hung on a tree was cursed. Yet Jesus endured the cross. Why? Verse 2 says: “For the joy set before him.” It is the joy of doing the Father’s will. And it was the joy saving you from the wrath to come!

REMEMBER THE ENTHRONEMENT OF JESUS. The writer seeks to encourage his readers by the example of Jesus. Don’t miss the progression of the text. Verse 1 exhorts us to run with endurance. Verse 2 says Jesus endured the cross. And verse 3 says, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary and fainthearted.” But the writer does not want his readers to forget that the cross was not the end of the story. Assuming

the resurrection, verse 2 closes by highlighting the enthronement of Jesus: “and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Because Jesus endured, he was promoted from the shame of the cross to the glory of the throne. Psalms 110:1 says: The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Jesus is the fulfillment of this verse. He is seated in triumphant majesty at the right hand of God. This is where Jesus is right now. He is seated in sovereign authority to reign over heaven and earth. This means that he is able to help you through whatever dangers, toils, and snares you face as you finish your race.

Derek Redmond represented Great Brittan in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, running the 400-meter race. He was viewed as a serious threat to take home the gold medal— or at last to nab second-place silver. But when the medal-winning runners crossed the finish line, Derek was not among them. Partway through the race, Derek’s hamstring ruptured, causing him to fall to the track in agony. While the other athletes raced past him to victory, he lay on the ground in tears. But finally he rose to his feet. And with pain dogging his every step, he began to hobble to the finish line. Suddenly a middle-aged man wearing a T-shirt and a ball cap jumped from the stand, fought his way past security, and ran directly to Derek’s side. It was Jim Redmond, Derek’s father. Arm in arm and shoulder to shoulder; Jim carried Derek, supporting the weight that his son’s injured leg could not. Together they stayed in Derek’s lane all the way to the finish line, which they crossed together. As they took the last step, the crown in Barcelona rose to its feet in a standing ovation, cheering and crying tears of triumph for Derek – and his father.