

“The Christian Race”

Heb. 12:1-2

- INTRO. - The writers of the NT employ a number of different figures of speech to describe the Christian life. Sometimes it is compared to warfare. Paul says we are to be “good soldiers of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3) and that we are to “put on the full armor of God” (Eph. 6:11).
- The role of a Christians is also portrayed as that of a servant. Paul himself often referred to himself as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ – and we should see ourselves in the same way.
- Our Lord Himself often used metaphors and similes to describe His followers. He said we are salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). He said we are “living stones” with which He builds His church (1 Peter 2:5).
- But a favorite figure of speech (for NT writers) is the use of athletic terminology. Paul (for example) pointed to the sport of boxing and said, “I box in such a way, as not beating the air...” (1 Cor. 9:26) In essence Paul was saying that the Christian life is *not* that of mere shadow boxing. It is a real fight.
- But perhaps the favorite analogy (of NT writers) is to picture the Christian life as a race. Paul used this analogy several times. In 1 Cor. 9:24 he said, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”
- And here in Heb. 12 we see the author of Hebrews describing the Christian life as a race (as well). The theme of Heb. 12 is endurance (and perseverance). The Christians to whom this “sermon” was written were suffering persecution, so this chapter is given to urge them to endure it with faith.
- Heb. 12:1-2 serves as the author’s conclusion to chapter 11. The word “therefore” attaches this exhortation to the “hall of faith.” You *could* say that the author has finished his argument (from that chapter) and now he is drawing his conclusion.
- Sometimes our chapter divisions are unfortunate, and that may be the case here. I think we would have to say that 12:1-2 is the pinnacle of chapter 11. It is saying, “In light of all these great examples of faith, here is what we must do in response.”
- But we also need to see that the author of Hebrews goes beyond that (here). We would have to say that this exhortation is *not only* a conclusion to chapter 11, but to *everything* he has said in this epistle.
- He is going to move from the many examples of faith in chapter 11 to the perfect example (Jesus Christ) in chapter 12. But (in essence) he is saying to them (and to us) because we have a better revelation, and a better covenant, and a perfect,

once-for-all, completed sacrifice, we must respond in faith and run the Christian life with endurance.

- But before we walk through this significant exhortation today, I want to say that this passage has sometimes been abused. I have heard many sermons on this text that take a modern understanding of a race and go beyond what was originally intended here.
- George Guthrie writes, “We must *not* read anachronistically our modern clichés of a race back into this text.” The goal of our hermeneutics should always be to gain a clear understanding of the original author’s original intent (before we apply its truth to our lives). We must *not* read something into the text that is *not* there.
- But there have been a number of ways that preachers in our day and time have abused this. For example, some have compared this race as something in which we are in competition with one another.
- The analogy of a race (in this passage) is *not* intended to convey that idea. We’re *not* competing with other Christians, trying to outdo one another in holy living or faithful service. No, the one we are competing against in this race is the devil, and his wicked world system. We’re also competing against our own sinfulness – but we are not competing against other Christians.

- Some have misrepresented this passage by communicating the idea that “the race belongs to the strong” – so the more disciplined you are, the more likely you are to win the race.
- Of course, Christian discipline is important, but that is *not* what this passage is teaching. Sometimes this is combined with the first one, and preachers say something like, “You need to break out of the pack and get ahead of the other runners.” No, the concept that is being communicated (here) is the fact that *every* runner is intended to win, and everyone who endures will (in fact) win the race.
- Some have wrongly taught this passage as giving the idea that God promises to remove every obstacle in our way. That’s *not* what this passage is saying either.
- Others have used this text to convey the idea that you should pace yourself. The fact that the race being described here is a marathon and *not* a sprint has led some to the faulty application that if we pace ourselves we’ll get farther.
- The idea (that is sometimes communicated) is that you should *not* hit the Christian life hard (like a sprinter would) but you should live it in moderation and pace yourself and reserve your strength by *not* putting too much effort into it.

- Folks, that is absolutely foreign to the teaching of Scripture – and it is *not* what this passage of Scripture is teaching. But some also go to the opposite extreme. They say that the Christian life is all to be run in our own strength – that it is all up to us (and how disciplined we are). That also misses the mark. We must run the race in the strength of Christ. He calls upon us to endure (and run faithfully) but He supplies the strength we need.
- So we need to be careful about these types of abuses, but we can really get what the author is trying to communicate if we carefully analyze the grammatical structure of the text and the use of the terms he employs.
- So let's move into it (now) and we will take it in three main divisions. We're going to see the exhortation, the elements, and the example. We'll also have a few sub-points, but that is our main outline. Notice, first of all:

I. THE EXHORTATION (v. 1)

- The first thing we need to note is that there is only one exhortation in these two verses. The exhortation is, “..Let us run...the race that is set before us...”
- “Let us run” is the focal verb, and everything else consists of supporting participles and prepositional phrases. The author includes himself in this

admonition. He also needs to run the race with endurance. And I believe this is clearly an exhortation to Christians. If you have never been born again through faith in Christ, you are *not* even in the race – but this is an admonition to all Christians to run the race well.

- And notice the word “race.” The Greek word is the word “agon,” from where we get our English word “agony.” It refers to a contest or a struggle. Hobbs says it include both peril and strain. In other words, the Christian life is *not* just fun and games.

- It's a race, *not* a stroll. It's *not* a jog, or a walk in the park – and it certainly is *not* laying down for a long winter nap. MacArthur says, “[This] race is not a thing of passive luxury, but is demanding, sometimes grueling and agonizing, and requires our utmost in self-discipline, determination, and perseverance.”

- He goes on to say, “God's people are not called to lie around on beds of ease. We are to run a race that is strenuous and continuous.” And again, we are not called upon to do this in our own strength, but we *are* called to run the race nonetheless.

- By the way, the Bible actually talks about four different postures to describe the Christian life. First, positionally we “sit” in heavenly places. In Eph. 2:5-6 it says, “...when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with

Christ...and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus...” That’s where we “sit” (positionally).

- Secondly, the Christian life is described in terms of a “walk.” Eph. 4:1 says, “...walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called...” That speaks of the manner of life we (as Christians) are called to live.

- Thirdly, we are commanded to “stand.” Eph. 6:11 says, “Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.” This speaks of our posture against our enemy, the devil. We’re *not* to give any ground to him, but to stand firm against his attacks with the full armor of God.

- Don’t misunderstand – that’s *not* some mystical thing at all. It involves the basics of Christian commitment and the spiritual tools God has provided for us to effectively stand against Satan.

- But the fourth posture we see in Scripture is this one given in the analogy of the race. We are to “run” the race of the Christian life. This speaks of our endurance and our faith and our commitment to Christ. (Pause) So we see the exhortation, but secondly we see:

II. THE ELEMENTS (v. 1)

- What are the qualifiers that give definition to what it means to run the Christian race? Our author gives three elements that may be understood as the manner in which we are to run the race well. First of all, he mentions:

A. The Eyewitnesses (v. 1a)

- Look again at v. 1, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us...” This (of course) refers back to all those examples of faith given in chapter 11.

- We are to run the race like they did and persevere like they did – and it is faith in God that will enable us to do that. This especially connects with those in the last part of that chapter (who were being persecuted). We’re to keep believing, and keep trusting, no matter what kind of obstacles we might face or what it might cost us.

- Now, some have portrayed this “great cloud of witnesses” as a heavenly stadium where all these saints of the past are gathered to watch us run. I don’t believe that is what this means. These are witnesses in the sense of examples of faith that have run the race before us.

- The idea is *not* that they are watching us, so we’d better *not* disappoint them. No, we run for God and we’d better *not* disappoint Him. We don’t run for the benefit these witnesses. They are examples, *not*

onlookers. They have proven by their testimony and their witness that God is always faithful and we can always trust Him.

- They have shown us by their own lives that the life of faith is the only way to live if we want to please God.

- At funerals people are always talking about departed saints looking down on us – but I don't find any real evidence of that in Scripture. Certainly if this is the only proof-text for that idea, it is *not* very sufficient for believing that.

- But the point (here) is that we are *not* the first ones who have been tried and tested in regard to our faith. We are *not* the first ones to suffer persecution and hardship. There have been others who have gone before us and have won the victory through faith.

- We have the same God they did. We have the same promises from God they did – in fact, we have even more because we now have the NT. And the point is, that God has not changed, and we can still trust Him fully as they did, and we can run the race as well as they did.

- Bruce writes, “It is *not* so much they who look at us as we who look to them—for encouragement.” There is a play on words in the Greek that connects this verse with 11:2. Essentially God has borne

witness to them that they are accepted by their faith, and now they bear witness to us that this is the way we are to run the race.

- The word for “cloud” was a common metaphor to designate a great throng of people, and by adding the phrase “such a great” to it, this is drawing attention to the fact that there have been countless witnesses who have gone before us. But there is another element he points to, and that is:

B. The Elimination (v. 1b)

- Before we run the race, there are some things we need to eliminate. There are some things that can hold us back and make it impossible to win the race. As with any good athlete, there are some things we have to say “no” to if we are going to expect to win the race.

- Verse 1 talks about some things we need to “lay aside.” These are obstacles that can prevent us from running well. And it's interesting – in Gal. 5:7 Paul talks about some Christians who were running well, but then began to falter. He asked them, “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?”

- So we see that “running well” and “obeying the truth” are synonymous, but Scripture makes it clear that there are some things that can hinder us in our race. The first injunction is the elimination:

1. Of Encumbrances

- Look at v. 1 again, "...let us also lay aside every encumbrance..." The word for "encumbrance" is "onkos." It simply means "extra mass or weight." It is not necessarily something sinful, but something extra you don't need.

- There may *not* be anything in the rules that prohibit the wearing of an 80 pound pack on your back when you run, but you are *not* likely to win the race of you do that.

- Or a runner could eat nothing but doughnuts leading up to the race, but he is *not* likely to win with that diet either. As I'm sure you know, world class athletes always watch what they eat as part of their training.

- This is pointing to anything that weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our energy, or dampens your enthusiasm for the things of God. In the case of the original recipients of this letter, the author probably had in mind the legalistic trappings of Judaism.

- But for us this could be any kind of hobby, or any kind of diversion, or any kind of imbalanced priority that keeps us from being all God wants us to be.

- Maybe you have your kids in so many activities that you don't have time for the church of Jesus Christ. Maybe you are so focused on making money and getting ahead in your career that you don't have anything left to invest in the eternal things of God. Maybe you are spending all your time playing video games and getting on Facebook that you don't have any time to devote to ministering to other people.

- There are hundreds of ways this might apply, (the word "every" implies that this could be any number of things) so we just have to allow the HS to convict us of ways in which we might be guilty of this.

- But the question we need to ask ourselves is, "If I am in a race, and I am running to win, what kind of extra weight do I need to lay aside in order to do that?"

- Many times we (as Christians) sacrifice the best for the good. We settle for things that are *not* necessarily bad, but they are *not* God's best. We need to get rid of some extra stuff. We need to remove the clutter.

- Ron Phillips says, "It is possible to spend all our time in business, social, community, and personal activities that are good, and forget the race." We forget that we are in a race and we should be running to win.

- Our lives can become like that closet that you don't dare open because you know it will all spill out if you do. Some of us are not (really) even running the race because we have too much extra weight in our lives. Then there is the elimination:

2. Of Entanglements

- Verse 1 says, "...and the sin which so easily entangles us..." Of course, it should go without saying that we (as Christians) should eliminate sin from our lives.

- But it is interesting, that here it says that sin easily entangles us. The word for "entangles" is a word that could refer to a vine or a rope that gets wrapped around the legs and prevents the runner from running.

- The reference to "sin" here is probably applicable to *any* sin. The definite article is used here, but it probably means "any sin that wraps you up." Most Christians have one particular area of sin that tends to trip them up – and it is this sin (in particular) that we need to jettison from our lives.

- So there are some things we must eliminate if we are going to win the race, but then we also need to take note of a third element mentioned here. We need to see:

C. The Endurance (v. 1c)

- Look at v. 1 again, "...and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..." *Not only* are we to run, but we are to run *with endurance*. And the point (here) is that the Christian life is *not* a sprint, but a marathon. It requires "hupomone" (endurance). That is a steady determination to keep going no matter what.

- It means "keep running, even when you are tempted to give up or let up." If you have ever done any running (especially longer-distance running) you know that you can get to the place where everything in your body tells you to stop. Your lungs may feel like they are going to explode. Your legs may feel like they are going to stop working. The pain may be enormous.

- This is really the main message for the original audience of this book. They were in danger of giving up on the Christian faith. They were in danger of succumbing to the pressures of their persecution. And we have to be concerned about the same kinds of things.

- For us, it may be the temptation to grow weary in well-doing. It may be simple fatigue or weariness that may lead us to finding a bed of ease instead of continuing to run the race.

- The world we live in doesn't make this any easier. Our world tends toward a focus on leisure and entertainment. It is so easy to fall into the trap of slowing down in the race, or even stopping to run altogether.

- I've heard people talk about retirement in terms of, "I'm going to get an RV and see America," instead of, "I'm going to find a place of ministry where I can really count for Christ."

- And listen, you and I cannot stop running the race until we cross the finish line. We will (no doubt) get older, and we will have to deal with all the limitations that aging brings, but as long as the Lord leaves us here, we have to keep running.

- Well, there is one last thing we see in this passage of Scripture, and it is something I could easily preach an entire sermon on. Lastly we see:

III. THE EXAMPLE (v. 2)

- Go on to v. 2, "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

- The author of Hebrews has pointed to a wide variety of people who have demonstrated true biblical faith – but *now* he points to the *perfect*

example, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must keep our eyes on Christ if we are going to win the race.

- In running, as in any sport, where you look is extremely important. Nothing will throw off your stride, or cause you to lose your balance and fall, more than looking down at your feet or up into the stands to see who is watching. You can't afford to look back and see if another runner is catching up to you.

- Why do you think they put "blinders" on horses who are running in a horse race? The point is, you have to keep looking straight ahead. You have to keep looking toward the finish line.

- The Christian race is no different. If you want to win the race, you have to keep your eyes on the finish line, which is Christ Himself.

- I heard about a farmer who was teaching his son how to plow straight rows in the field. He instructed him to set his eyes on an object straight ahead and *not* to take his eyes off that object.

- Christ is the object of our faith. He is the source of it, but He is also the perfecter (the completer) of it. If we keep our eyes on Christ, we will *not* be led astray. We will *not* stumble and fall. We will *not* be diverted from our God-given course.

- And listen, it's easy to fall into the trap of getting our eyes on other people instead of Christ. It's easy to start looking around at who is watching us and what they think of us, rather than living to please Christ.

- Churches can fall into this trap. We can make the church about some sort of "competition with each other" instead of all about Christ and doing His will.

- I came across this quote this week from a guy named Garrett Kell. He said, "It is much harder to look down on the sin of others when you are looking up at Jesus, who took your sin on the cross."

- We're going to be a lot more forgiving and patient with other people when we keep our eyes on Christ. We're going to be less judgmental when we consider that it was *my* sin that put Him on that cross.

- Keeping our eyes on Christ is the *key* to winning the Christian race. But notice what the author of Hebrews says about this. He uses the name Jesus, which emphasizes His humanity, particularly His endurance of pain, humiliation, and disgrace upon the cross.

- And he says that Jesus is "the author and perfecter of [our] faith." We've already seen this word for

"author." It is the Greek word "archegos" and it means "the source." It can mean "pioneer, originator, champion, forerunner, or leader." This simply means that Jesus is the *source* of all genuine, biblical faith.

- But this can also mean that He is our "chief example." He is the One we should look to, to learn how to live the Christian life. He is the One we should look to for understanding how to win the race.

- He is our supreme example. He was tempted just like we are tempted, but He never sinned. He lived a perfect life of faith. He trusted His heavenly Father explicitly throughout His life on earth. So we are to follow His example.

- But He is *not only* the "archegos" (the author) of our faith; He is also the "teleiotes" (the completer or perfecter) of our faith. Of course, He completed our faith (as far as atonement and sacrifice) on the cross. When He shouted "it is finished" (from the cross) our salvation was fully and perfectly complete. This is why the author of Hebrews says He "endured the cross, despising the shame." He did that to perfect (or complete) our salvation.

- But He did that for a reason. It was for the joy that was set before Him. He knew where He was headed after the cross. He looked beyond the cross to the crown.

- Look at it again, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” This is another reference to Ps. 110:1 – His exaltation. He faced the agony of the cross by clinging to the joy of His ultimate exaltation at the right hand of the Father.

- This is the very same thing that we saw in chapter 11, as the people of faith kept their eyes on the reward. They were able to endure suffering and to stand up under persecution because they kept their ultimate focus on the reward.

- And listen, there is another aspect of the fact that Christ is the “perfecter” of our faith. This means that He was *not only* there at the beginning of your salvation, to get you started – but He is also there every step of the way until you cross the finish line.

- “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:6) He is the One who brings our salvation to its intended goal – which is our glorification.

- Part of the “joy” that was set before Him was the fact that (in the cross) He was bringing many sons to glory. He’ll never let you down. He’ll never leave you or forsake you. He is there for you, every step of the way.

- What does that mean? It means you can persevere. It means you can endure. It means you can finish the race He has called you to run. In the same way He endured the cross and despised the shame, so you too can face your pain and suffering in this fallen world. You too can stand up against trials and testing and adversity with genuine faith.

- ILL. – Preachers who preach on this text often cite the example of Eric Liddell (and rightfully so). As you may know, from the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Liddell was from Scotland and was described as having “wings on his feet.” He had trained for years for the shorter races, but in the 1924 Olympics he refused to run his main event because it was on Sunday and Liddell was a committed Christian who believed he should honor the Lord’s Day.

Well, as it turned out, he went on and qualified for two longer events (later in the week) that he had never trained for, and he ended up setting world records in both events. But that is *not* where he exemplifies Heb. 12:1-2. It was after the Olympics, when he left everything behind (all the fame and accolades of the world) to become a missionary in China. At the end of his faithful life for Christ, he finally crossed the finish line in a Chinese prison. When he died, his eyes were still firmly fixed on Christ.

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER