

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

Introduction

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of people tempted to return to what they perceived was the purity of Judaism; the Hebrews experienced pressure from increasing temptation and persecution for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer encourages the believer in Jesus to endure and persevere in suffering and stand against the temptation to abandon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The godly life in Christ includes perseverance, faithfulness and discipline. We are in a spiritual race—but we also have a role model—Jesus. We suffer—but our suffering cannot be compared to the suffering of Jesus. We are in a race and our finish line is heaven. We are in a race for abundant life—now and forever. We are in a race to live with God forever. We are in a race that begins in Jesus and ends with Jesus. We are in a race that is marked by pain and suffering but will result in glory. Our starting line is Jesus. Our finish line is Heaven.

The writer of Hebrews places in a stadium—surrounded by the cheers of the saints (v.1) but is quick to remind us of the struggle—and asks us to abandon everything that will hinder us in the race (v.1b-c). The writer includes a strategy for the race (vv.2-3)—we want to win—our incentive to win—is Jesus—we look away from all those things that might fill our hearts and distract us or discourage us or defeat us and we look to Jesus and we resist sin!

We Are In A Spiritual Race (v.1)

Hebrews 12:1-4 (NKJV) *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,*

The writer of Hebrews has given several exhortations; “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away” (Heb.2:1); “Therefore, holy brethren partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus” (Heb.3:1). We were exhorted to “hold fast” (3:6)—take hold, squeeze tight—and then grip with all your might—those things that are sacred; “hear” (3:7;15; 4:7)—to hear His voice is to obey His word; “Take heed” (3:12)—that is watch your heart or it will harden; cultivate godliness; allow the Spirit and the Word to keep your heart tender; “exhort” (3:13)—that is stir one another by exhortation and it will help prevent the life of defeat.

“fear” (4:1)—a godly fear is a stimulus to faith—an incentive to love and a prevention of failure. We were exhorted to “hold fast without wavering” (10:23); “provoke” (10:24)—that is provoke to love—and labor to enjoy His favor; “Not forsaking” (10:25) the assembling of ourselves together; we are to “call to remembrance” (10:32)—because a short memory will result in a long loss—“cast not away” (10:35); do not throw away your confidence—to lose your confidence is to lose your anchor in the storm—do not drift away; “believe” (10:39); “lay aside” (12:1); weights are all the heavy objects that weigh us down and “the sin” are all our encumbrances—and “let us run”—we run with patience—so we can be rewarded with endurance!

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

The weight (*ogkos*) means weight or burden—and so is a metaphor for an encumbrance in our Christian walk or run. The NIV spells it out by translating this “everything that hinders”.

What is slowing you down?

Ain't nothin gonna breaka my stride

Nobody's going to slow me down—oh oh—I've got to keep on movin'

“*and the sin which so easily ensnares us*” all one word (*euperistatos*—only here in the Greek NT); Greek scholars Westcott—‘*readily encircling, besetting, entangling* (p.394). Marcus Dods suggests “that which characterizes all sin, the tenacity with which it clings to a man” (EGT; 4:365). And so—“the sin which clings so close to us”.

The child of God must always remember we have a loving Savior a wise Shepherd who keep us. We must also remember we have a wily enemy—the Devil who seeks to ensnare us. We are warned to watch for the snare of the devil (1 Timothy 3:7). What ensnared the Devil also serves as a warning against us—Lucifer was overcome with pride and became Satan (Ezekiel 28:1-9). There is the snare of riches—‘they that will be rich fall into temptation, and a snare (1 Tim.6:9). There is the snare of sleepiness; “Awake themselves out of the snare of the devil” (2 Tim.2:26). There is the snare of idolatry ‘Gideon made an ephod. . . which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house” (Judges 8:27). We engage in idolatry when we live for God substitutes—when we place created things in the place of the Creator. There is the snare of faltering—“Thine eye shall have no pity upon them, neither shalt thou serve their gods, for that will be a snare unto thee” (Deuteronomy 7:16). There is the snare of fear “The fear of man brings a snare” (Proverbs 29:25). If we fear God we need not fear anyone else—man or devil. And of course there is the snare of evil companionship “They shall be snares and traps unto you” (Joshua 23:13)—evil companions corrupt morals—they will drag you down.

Sin is like the stench of smoke that clings to clothes. A cloth can cover our wounds or hide our sores but the finest silk will not cover our sins. Even designer clothes can stink from smoke. J.C. Ryle said, “The very animals whose smell is most offensive to us have no idea that they are offensive, and are not offensive to one another. And man, fallen man, has just no idea what a vile thing sin is in the sight of God.”

Ryle said, “Sin forsaken is one of the best evidences of sin forgiven”.

Sin.

Sin wouldn't be so attractive if the wages were paid immediately.

Thomas Manton wrote; “First we practice sin, then defend it, then boast of it.”

The word “endurance” is perhaps the key word in the chapter (v.1;2-3; 7 and 20). The word means “to bear up under pressure or trial—to continue—when the going is tough” (*hupomone*).

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

The metaphor of the race seems to include the idea of a long distance runner.

The cloud of witnesses can function as either the crowd watching the race—but these specific witnesses seem to include the faithful of chapter 11—who have already run the race—and can testify for God—and that God is faithful. We might think of these as faithful heroes of the past—who are watching those who are running for the same honors—much like veteran Olympic athletes watching contemporary athletes in the same competition.

The saints of old serve as a kind of inspiration; the heroes in chapter 11 have run the race. They endured. Former participants are now spectators. They witness our race and our performance. They are keenly interested in how we will run! **These saints stood fast—in times of trial and testing, temptation and opposition. Did they give in too temptation? From time to time—but never for long—and never—forever! They may have experienced sin for a season—but not as a life-style—not as a way of life. They endured in faith.**

These Christians were going through a time of testing (10:32-39). These Christians were tempted to give in and give up (v.3). No one had as yet been called to die for Christ (v.4). The writer will give three encouragements—that would keep them going and growing; the example of Jesus (vv.2; 4); the assurance of the love of God (vv.5-13; and the power of the grace of God (vv.14-29)

We Have A Spiritual Role Model (vv.2-3)

2looking 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 see Jesus as the author of faith. And since He is the author of faith He is worthy of imitation and inspiration. The Lord Jesus is the supreme example of the Christian race. The word 'looking unto Jesus' can mean to fix your eyes on Him—but also your mind on Him. Why? Jesus ran this race. He knows exactly how to run! He is the author of faith—and perfected—completed the race. Jesus is the picture of perfect obedience to His Father; perfect dependence and righteousness.

We consider Him (v.3)—that is how he acted—and we will know what to do! Jesus is also the 'finisher' (*teleiotes—found only here—comes from a verb which literally means to bring to an end*).

We look to Jesus (which means we must look away from ourselves and everything else). The runner envisions the finish line. The only way you will be able to successfully look away from sin—is to see Jesus. Our eyes fixed on Jesus is the only way to live in a sinful world.

This means that we have to look away from everything else and everyone else.

But looking at Jesus means we look at what motivated Jesus; “who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross”.

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

You are that joy! We might put the joy another way—it is the glorious day of redemption! The glorious day is the day of salvation. It is the day when we are united together and exalted together in Christ. It is the day when sin disappears forever and there is a new heaven and a new earth. It is that glorious day when believers in every dispensation are united forever—in constant praise of Christ as King. The joy of redemption and all that redemption brings!

Jesus suffered in order to obtain a future reward.

In one powerful and brief sentence the writer tells us who our model is; what he did and why he did it and where he is at this very moment.

Jesus is the supreme example of discipline.

Jesus played by God's rules. Jesus runs the race—and then dies and rises from the dead so that we might run as well. Jesus ignores and despises the shame of the cross—in order to finish—in perfect obedience to His Father. Jesus did this voluntarily and willingly. And so Jesus becomes the supreme example of receiving the reward of faith. He is exalted at the right hand of the throne of God. Believer's witnessed His ascension into heaven. Steven saw Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father.

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

The writer invites us to “consider Him” who endured such hostility (antilogia) —literally a speaking against—in Jude 11 it clearly means rebellion—but here more likely hostility or opposition (NIV).

The word ‘consider’ means—carefully evaluate—compare—reckon—count up—weigh. We focus on Jesus—we consider His sufferings and then compare them to our sufferings!

Jesus is the supreme example of suffering.

Who are you? Widow? Orphan? Victim? Criminal? Prostitute? Slave? Sufferer?

Were you born to an unwed mother? Were you born in a feeding trough? Were your parents poor? Did someone try to kill you as a child? Did you have to run for your life? Were you raised in place worse than Nazareth? Did your earthly father die early in your life? Did you have to support mother, brothers and sisters? Were you homeless? Were you hated and rejected by the religious establishment? Were you ever accused of being insane or demon possessed? Were you rejected by your own family? Were you betrayed by someone you loved? Were you rejected and forsaken by friends and family? Were you ever tried in court and found innocent and still punished? Have you ever been tortured? And have you ever been crucified?

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

Why do we do this? Why compare?
We do this so we won't give up. We do this so we won't despair!

The verbs translated "lest you become weary" and "discouraged" or lose heart were sometimes used to describe runners who had "hit the wall"—when exhaustion takes over—endurance calling to mind the runner who is prepared to run for the long haul.

Walter Elliott wrote; "Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another."

I like that.

Have you grown weary? Are you discouraged in your souls?
What wears on us? What is likely to bring discouragement? The list is long. We can think of illness or sickness; poverty, life, death, sin!

Paul told Timothy; "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3). Paul reminded Timothy that he too was suffering—but there suffering served at least two purposes; he was suffering for Christ and with Christ for the benefit of the Church. A soldier suffers for the benefit of his country and his loved ones. Paul writes; "Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10).

Augustine wrote; "Who would wish for hardship and difficulty? You command us to endure these troubles, not to love them. No one loves what he endures even though he may be glad to endure it."

Endurance seems like a lost virtue. The philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote; "To endure is the first thing that a child ought to learn, and that which he will have the most need to know."

We Are Given Specific Reassurances (v.4)

4You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

How bad could it get?

We are to resist sin. We are to resist the besetting sin—those things that trip us up, tear us down, smother and entangle us in bondage! And we resist the most difficult sin of all—the sin that tells us to give up—on Christ and the Gospel. The sin that says leave the track—walk away! This will set the stage for the verses that follow—and remind us that for some we may experience further discipline. Discipline will expose us as either children of God or charlatans playing with religion!

The Believer's Race

Hebrews 12:1-4

G.K. Chesterton wrote; “Jesus promised his disciples three things—that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy and in constant trouble”.

Jesus resisted temptation. This is the picture of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and Calvary's Cross.

Paul told the Corinthians “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. (v.25) “And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown” (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

Paul was interested in an eternal reward. Athletes give up their rights to win a temporary crown. Christians lay aside privileges and convenience to win an eternal crown.

Justin Martyr wrote; “You can kill us, but you can't hurt us.”

We are called to submit to God and resist sin. But sin will sometimes disguise itself as the good—and seek to connect to what is good. Sin is like a virus that will connect itself to a healthy cell and then infect the healthy cell.

How do we resist sin? We learn and live God's Word (Psalm 119:11; John 15:7). Someone has said, “The Bible will keep one from sinning, or sin will keep one from the Bible”.

How do we resist sin? The intercession of the Son of God (Luke 22:32) and the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6; John 7:37-39).

Conclusion

V. Raymond Edman would constantly say; “It is always too soon to quit.”

Running the race includes inspiration (v.1); discipline (v.1); example (v.2); we keep our minds on Jesus (v.3) and we resist temptation (v.4).