

Run the Race of your Life (Heb. 12.1-4)

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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, ² 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. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Introduction

In Hebrews 12.1-4, the author begins his concluding applications that we find in chapters 12-13. First, he orients his applications to the examples of chapter 11; here, he refers us to the great cloud of witnesses. Then, in 12.5 to the end of the book (13.25), he presents a number of applications that do not have the cloud of witnesses as their orientation point; they have *the* witness, the Lord Jesus, as their orientation point. In fact, the cloud of witnesses has a significantly subordinate role. Picture some athletes competing in an amphitheatre; that is the image the writer uses. The competitors are in the arena and the tiers surrounding them are crowded with people: are these people fans? Are they cheering their favorites on with applause and shouts of loud acclaim? Do the runners wave to the crowds and bow before standing ovations? No, the crowds are witnesses not fans. The competitors do not even look at the large and noisy crowds. Instead, the athletes have their eyes on one person. Seeing all others may be in their peripheral vision, but in this use of analogy, they have their eyes on the person sitting beyond the goal line. The application of the dramatic image of the Roman Coliseum is distinctively Christian as it comes from the preacher's pen. He uses the image of runners in the crowded amphitheatre to call the readers, then and now (them and us), to run the race of their lives to the goal where Jesus sits. As they run to Him as the goal, they have the cloud of witnesses in their peripheral vision.

So, today, we will cover this exhortation from Hebrews 12.1-4: run the race of your life. The following questions map our way through this text as three hooks on which to hang our thoughts: what does it mean to run the race of your life? What is the basis for running the race of your life? What is the way to run the race of your life? (In three words: meaning, basis, and way)

1A. What does it mean to run the race of your life?

The preacher drops this dramatic image of a footrace into his sermon without explicit definition. He leaves it to us to discern what he means by following his flow of thought that brings him to the exhortation at the end of verse 1: **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.** You have a race to run. We need to define what this means specifically.

1) The definition begins with the examples of Hebrews 11

When you think back to the previous chapter, you have to immediately conclude that in view is the race of faith. It is the life of those who live by faith to the preservation of their souls (10.39). The track leads to the heavenly Canaan; the course to run is a journey, a pilgrim journey on the pathway of obedience. We travel through the wilderness with many trials and pitfalls in the road; we travel into the land of rest to possess our possessions. There are battles to fight in the land of our rest because our rest involves receiving the down payment and foretaste of what is yet to come, the fullness of eternal Sabbath rest.

Chapter 11 also teaches us that this race takes us to the very end of our lives. You see that if you recall the final days of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. You also see it in the history recounted.

The fact that there are opposing forces within (sin that besets us) and without (the hostility of sinners) shows that the race is intense and demands the discipline of a warrior on the battlefield. Clearly, the image of the athlete indicates the intensity that running the race requires. Running takes training and preparation, but when you get to the actual race, it takes intense focus and discipline. He tells us to run with endurance. This is active; this is intense. The author is exhorting us to run the race of persevering faith. He is calling us to endure in faithful obedience

on the journey through the wilderness; we are to travel across the battlefield of sin working hard at the obedience of faith. That is the race we are to run for dear life!

2) The definition needs one more key thing: the race is God-ordained

The preacher notes that our lives unfold by the fore-ordaining plan of God for he says, **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**. The race track from here to glory is mapped out ahead of us by the sovereign Lord who rules human history to the smallest detail. Remember, not a sparrow falls to the ground outside of His knowledge and will.

The saints of old (11.2) furnish us with an assortment of lives lived before the Lord. Their lives were not accidents of time, space, and matter. They had a pilgrimage to make, a pathway to walk, and a journey to complete. To switch images, each had a race to run. When we think about the differences, we have to recognize that the walk, the race, and the pathway were "set before them." The pathway for Abel, Enoch, and Noah was God-ordained. Abel's pathway ended with a premature and violent death; Enoch's pathway included the unique fact that God took him straight to heaven without death. Noah's pathway took him through a global judgment of the human family. Some of the witnesses of the people of old died by the edge of the sword and others escaped the edge of the sword. For some the pathway on this earth was marked by great victories with suffering in the background; for others the pathway on this earth was marked by great suffering in the foreground; still, by faith both groups were victorious.

The race to run is the life God has for us to live. Central here has to be the place of good works: **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** ¹⁰ **For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them** (Eph. 2.8-10). Each believer has a calling to fulfill and a work in life to complete. It includes what we think and what we say when we are on our death beds and can do little. The examples of the son, grandson, and great grandson of Abraham show this fact to us in bold print. When the work is complete, including the final hours of our death, then the race will be over and the glory of the heavenly Canaan will be our reward.

Our life is a journey, the journey is a race. There is a pathway appointed by the Lord and the goal is the city with foundations whose builder and maker is God. Our lives and personal histories are part of the grand movement of history from the creation to its goal in the eternal Sabbath. So, run the race set before you, run the race of your life!

2A. What is the basis for running the race of your life?

Note how the exhortation is grounded in the preceding context. Chapter 11 is a virtual premise of examples that leads to the conclusion indicator "**therefore**" in 12.1. The words immediately after "**therefore**" (12.1a) reiterate that premise of examples: **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**. In turn, this yields the concluding exhortation: run the race set before you.

We mentioned earlier that the crowds surrounding the arena are not fans but witnesses. We are prompted to run by many witnesses; they engulf us like a great cloud. So, how do they witness? Are they witnessing *for us* or *to us*? They are not present to see our progress and bear witness to how well we are doing by their applause. Instead, they witness by example; they speak, they motivate, and they prompt us forward as our feet hit the ground in front of us.

Witnesses have the function of prodding us along. They do this by their testimony presented in chapter 11. Two important things make up their prodding when we view it this way. 1) They encourage us to run with faith knowing that if they trusted the Lord in the context of the shadows of promise, *then how much more ought we to trust Him now* in the noon day sun of fulfillment of those promises. This binds us all the more in light of the fact that we have the promises in the Lord Jesus Christ for our needs in each lunge forward that we make in life. The encouragement and encouragements of chapter 11 give testimony to us of the grace of God. 2) Moreover, they call us to the duty to run the race set before us in a manner in keeping with how the saints of old ran the race set before them; they prompt us to hope-filled faith and to faith-filled obedience. Okay then, how much more ought you to run for dear life!

3A. What is the way to run the race of your life?

The way we are to run the race is like a coin with two sides. As I read verses 1-2, note the negative then the positive: **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, ² 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.**

1B. On one side, we have the negative

The wise runner who competes in earnest will lighten his load: he will **lay aside every weight**. Although an Olympic runner may wear leg weights in practice, he will not do so in the track meet. Leg weights and all extra baggage will not be present during the competition. The extra weights in view refer to sin as the next phrase indicates: **and sin which clings so closely**. Sin weighs us down and slows our progress toward the goal and prize of the high calling in Christ.

The negative side of the exhortation to run in a Christian way involves laying aside sin that hinders forward momentum. Before leaving this point, we should pick up on the challenge that goes with turning away from sin. Sin clings. It is not as simple as untying the laces of leg weights to have them slip off automatically; you know: by the sheer weight of gravity. Sin is more akin to lint that gets on your clothes. Of course, lint is not heavy, but it clings. Recently, I left some tissues in my jeans. When they came out of the wash they were totally covered with fragments of white lint. An interesting part of removing lint is the stubborn way that it clings. Some fragments will float away by shaking and then come right back magnetically. Now sin is like that in its stubbornness. It is difficult to shake it loose and when you do so, it is often the case that it returns like fragments of metal to a magnet. The illustration captures a point here: the magnet is our sinful hearts which attract various fragments of sin. Metal in the comparison is heavy. If you do not do regular battle with sin, it will cling to you, weigh you down, slow you down, and hinder your running in the race of your life.

2B. On the other side, we have the positive

We know, of course, from general Scriptural teaching that turning away from sin is only one side of the coin. The way to run the race of life also involves "turning to," that is, turning to our Lord.

The author finds it natural and easy to leap *from* the chapter full of OT saints *to* Jesus. The promises that the people of old saw only from afar without obtaining them pointed like an arrow to Jesus. He is a greater high priest because He lives forever as a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7.17). Thus, He lives and intercedes for us in the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7.16). Therefore, He brought all the types and shadows of the ceremonial law to fulfillment. He established a new and better covenant based on better promises. Accordingly, we have the significant shift from the people of faith who trusted the promises dimly lit to the encouragement to the people of the new covenant to trust the promises brightly illuminated. It is all because of Jesus. In Him, the promises of God are yes and amen (2 Cor. 1.20).

What then are the things about Christ that we are to look to and contemplate in looking to Him? Specific things about our Lord are listed here as vital and central in running the race in this way. There are two points here intertwined. He is the source of our faith in its beginning and He is the source of our faith in its continuing: **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 (12.2).**

1) First, we are to look to Him as the source of our faith in its beginning

This is an outlook. It is a mindset, a mind set on Christ as you look to run the race He set before you. Looking to Him, consider the fact that He is the author of your faith. The standard to keep in this track meet is enormously high, especially, in light of the caliber of examples put before us from the OT. Therefore, it is profoundly encouraging to know that Jesus is the founder and author of our faith.

This encouragement is enhanced by consideration of how Jesus authors our faith. There is a turn in the image of the track race. Ultimately, we have the classic runner in the Lord Jesus who ran the race set before Him: **who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame (12.2).** He ran the race of life that God set before Him and it had the goal of joy. His goal

was joy, particularly, the joy of bringing us glory. His joy was to finish the race the Father gave Him to do in the *pactum salutis* (the eternal covenant of redemption, Jn. 17.1-2; Heb. 2.13-14). By finishing His race, by living His life to the glory of God, He won the victory of our salvation: **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** (Heb. 2.10). This is a marvelous teaching. Our faith is His gift to us and *He obtained that gift for us by enduring the cross, despising the shame*, and being made perfect through suffering. You see, in doing His part as our Savior, Jesus left nothing undone. By His death, He not only endured our punishment and satisfied the wrath and justice of God against us, but by His death, He also remedied our inability to believe in Him and come to Him. He reconciled us by His blood, which means that He conquered our resisting hearts (Rom. 5.10). We may not understand this truth fully, but we know the fact truly. To paraphrase the song we sang earlier: "I know not how this saving faith to me He did impart" ...and I do not understand how the Spirit by the word works "creating faith in me" ... *but I know Him*.

2) Second, we are to look to Him as the source of our faith in its continuing

What shows that this is the case? The statement here that He is not only the author but also the **perfecter of our faith** ties with the fact that He is **seated at the right hand of the throne of God** (12.2).

There is so much about faith in these sections of Hebrews, about our faith, but none of it elevates faith to a condition on which God somehow depends. Do we have any flavor of that in chapter 11? I dare say we do not. In fact we have just the opposite (11.1-2). Clearly, this text (12.2) gives us the ultimate assurance of knowing that it is the Lord Jesus who authored our faith in its beginning and He is the one that sustains it in its continuing. We are not to lose sight of the need for faith to please God. We are not to lose sight of the encouragement to faith of chapter 11. We are not to lose sight of the call to obedient faith. Thus, we have much work to do; we have a race of faith and perseverance to run. However, knowing the Lord Jesus as author and finisher of our faith (as fact and motivation) is *where we get our second wind* when the going gets rough.

Therefore, balance is necessary. We must not veer to the left or the right. We must work hard in learning obedience. We must expend great energy and intense effort to bring all things captive to the obedience of Christ. We must spend much time conversing with God and listening carefully to His speaking. Along with this effort, we are to rest secure on the one who promises us great things for the future. This is so encouraging. It is encouraging to know that our salvation in its beginning and continuing does not depend on us in any way; it does not depend on our faith. Our salvation depends on Jesus. Thus, with this outlook and up-look, run the race of your life!

Application (what is the key to endurance in this race?)

To run the race God has for you with full intensity, you must keep your eyes on Christ.

When the fact of the battlefield enters the picture in the face of opposition from both within your hearts and from those outside the household of faith, there is one sure key to endurance without fainting: consider what Jesus suffered, compare it with what you have experienced: if you do this carefully and truthfully, you will not faint or grow weary: ³ **Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.** ⁴ **In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood** (12.3-4). Of all the examples to encourage faithful obedience, you come finally to the example *par excellence*, your Lord Jesus Christ. Keep your eyes on Him with determined resolve and singleness of purpose to run the race of your life by heartfelt, earnest, and determined learning at His feet and by heartfelt, earnest, and determined living by His will for His honor and glory.

Let us fall down before the majesty of our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered the punishment of our sins thereby obtaining eternal redemption for us; may we acknowledge our total need of Him and may we be filled to fullness with gratitude to Him for the gift He gave us of saving faith and for the grace He gives in sustaining our faith; may the Holy Spirit teach us the importance of the means that He has appointed for strength in our running with God; may He enable us to strive, run, and fight strongly and honorably for Jesus our risen Lord, to the triune God be all glory, now and forevermore, amen.