

Lesson 48
Running the Race
Hebrews 12:1-4

Have you ever been so “under the load” in your Christian life that you wanted to chuck the whole thing? Perhaps you have been so discouraged and depressed by adverse circumstances, obstacles to your faith, and temptations to sin that you just wanted to quit and give up. You may have discovered for the first time that Christianity at times is a battle, a struggle, and a warfare. For all of us, it is a hard thing to learn that Christianity is “fighting the good fight of faith.”

If you have been at this place in your experience, you are in good company. Every true Christian has experienced the momentary desire to give up Christianity and go back into the world system. Even first century Christians experienced this emotion, for these Hebrew-Christians to whom the author was writing the Epistle to the Hebrews were considering leaving Christianity and going back into unbelieving Judaism because the social persecution against them by unsaved Jews was very trying. They wanted to give up, but the author of Hebrews encouraged them to push on in Christ.

The author, in this context, compares the Christian life to an athlete running a race. The author’s point is that all Christians are running the spiritual race. They are not running for earthly crowns, but for heavenly crowns. How Christians run the race has eternal consequences. It is not only important that every true Christian run the race, but that he finishes it. If a professing Christian does not finish the race, he shall not see Jesus. Every true Christian will finish the race, but some will do better than others in the running of the race. Some will finish first and some last, but all will finish the race.

THE PREPARATION FOR THE RACE - Hebrews 12:1a

“Therefore ...” -- The “therefore” takes us back to what preceded and refers to Hebrews 10:35-36: **“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.”** These Hebrew-Christians had great need to endure or persevere in their faith in Christ, and the author is exhorting them to run the Christian life as an athlete runs a track race.

“... since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us ...” -- The “cloud of witnesses” refers to Old Testament saints mentioned in Chapter 11. This does not seem to teach that the Old Testament saints who died are now looking down on us from heaven, but it is a picture of a huge coliseum, fielding a Greek athletic event. There are thousands of spectators looking on and they are witnessing to or saying something to the New Testament saints. Their lives are examples to us to run the Christian race well, for in their lives, work, and suffering they testify to us that they were true men of faith and that faith perseveres.

“... let us lay aside every encumbrance ...” -- The word “encumbrance” literally means “weight,” “bulk,” or “fat.” This is an athletic word and speaks of a track runner who has nothing

to hinder him when running a race. You never see an overweight man on a track team. A runner must train and discipline himself in diet and hard work to get himself in shape for the big race. The race is won or lost on the training field where there is rigorous self-denial, discipline, and vigorous exertion.

The Christian is not called to lie down on a flowery bed of ease, but to a life of self-sacrifice and self-discipline. He is in constant training, putting forth strenuous activity to win the race for Christ. The runner does not wait until a crucial race before he discovers his need to remove excess weight, but he trains for months, getting himself in shape.

Anything that keeps the Christian from effectively running the Christian race is to be set aside, for there is nothing more important than running the Christian life. An “encumbrance” or “weight” may not be sin per se, but it is a hindrance. As a Christian, you may be hampered by something that you know you must give up for Christ, for this particular thing is retarding your progress in the Christian life. Perhaps you may have some particular worldly hang-up and you do not want to give it up. If you do not give it up, you might not finish the race, and a failure to finish the race has tremendous eternal consequences. Self-denial and discipline are part of the Christian life. You never say “yes” to Christ without saying “no” to something else.

Faith must always precede discipline or all will end in failure and self-effort. Faith always results in works.

Perhaps a Christian has some questionable or doubtful practice in his life which he likes because it feeds his flesh, but he does not want to part with it. He rationalizes, “What harm is there in this thing? It is not a sin per se, because the Bible does not state it to be such.” Perhaps not; but is it a weight? Does it hinder your testimony for Christ before men? Will it encumber you so that you will not run the race effectively? Put this thing away if it keeps you from running the race with power!

“... and the sin which so easily entangles us ...” -- This is a picture of a runner trying to run with his warm-up clothes, and for a Greek, this would have been a toga and sandals. It would be like you and me trying to run with a bulky bathrobe and combat boots. The runner would get entangled in the robe and hinder his effectiveness.

The “sin” (notice it is singular) does not refer to acts of sin, but to the sin of unbelief. The sin of unbelief so cleverly surrounds us and causes us to trip up in our Christian walk. Unbelief is the sin mentioned all through the book of Hebrews. Unbelief is a failure to take God and His revelation in the Bible seriously. Unbelief is the basis for all sin in the Christian life. Unbelief so subtly creeps up on us; we must become aware of our tendency to lapse into it and we must rid ourselves of it. Repeated and continual unbelief of a professing Christian may cause him to give up and not finish the race, and this has eternal consequences.

THE RACE — Hebrews 12:1b

“... and let us run with endurance the race ...” -- The Christian is to run the race, not walk it. This shows us that the Christian life is not a passive thing, but active, energetic, and vigorous.

To run, one must put out effort, and that involves the determination of the human will. The Christian is to run from start to finish with patience, perseverance, and persistence. The believer needs patience as he seeks to run the Christian race for his Lord in this wicked world. The Christian life is like a distance race; it takes training, discipline, and endurance to win it. The last hundred yards of any distance race is grueling, and it takes real “guts” to finish the race.

Most Christians want to run the hundred yard dash but are not interested in endurance runs. When the going gets tough, they want to quit. Yet God has told us that the Christian life is an endurance race; it is grueling at times, and it takes determination and “guts” to push on in the race, but the reward is great, for the finish line is heaven.

“... that is set before us ...” -- God has told us that the course is set before us; it is all planned out by God. The rules of the course and the limits marked out by God must be followed. Yet it is a comfort to know that God has sovereignly appointed the path before us.

We know where the starting line is, for that is when we first believed in Christ, but only God knows where the finish line is and all the obstacles along the course. Obstacles will be placed in the way; there will be trials and hardships, but we must persevere, trusting our Lord to guide us to the finish line. None of us knows the length of the course for himself, but God knows what it will be for each of us. The course is longer and tougher for some than for others.

THE GOAL OF THE RACE - Hebrews 12:2

“... fixing our eyes on Jesus ...” -- The Greeks, when running any footrace, would hold a long pole right at the finish line. As the runners moved towards the finish line, grimacing with body pain, they would fix their eyes on the pole and run towards it. They would give full concentration to the pole and the finish line, trying to forget the pain of the body because of strain.

Jesus Christ is the final goal of all our spiritual training and endurance in our Christian lives. We are to run this life with our eyes fixed on the person of Christ. Running the Christian life involves total concentration, total attention and total occupation with Jesus Christ. Christ is the goal of the Christian life, and those who persevere to the end shall be with Jesus.

“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14).

The secret of perseverance is in the phrase, “looking unto Jesus.” Great men of the faith can inspire us. Men such as Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Wesley, Spurgeon, Moody, and others can challenge us to mobilize our forces, clench our fists, set our jaws, and cause us to be men and women of faith, but if that is our only motivation, we shall soon lose our heart and zeal. Great men can only inspire us and challenge us, but Jesus Christ alone can empower us. By faith, Christ can give us the power to persevere. ***“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me”*** (Phil. 4:13).

We must not take our eyes off Christ and look at the spectators, for as soon as we do, we will begin to break stride and perhaps stumble and be out of the race. We must rivet our attention on Christ, not being sidetracked by men or things that would compete for our attention.

“... the author and perfecter of faith, ...” -- The word “author” literally means “leader” or “pioneer” or “captain.” Christ is the Leader and Perfecter of faith. Our Lord went before us and lived the Christian life perfectly. He is the only one who never really faltered in the race of faith. Christ laid aside unbelief and every encumbrance, every tie of family and friends, to do the will of the Father. ***“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me”*** (John 6:38).

“... who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” -- Jesus Christ finished His race, and He did the Father’s will perfectly. Christ Himself suffered more than any man to bring salvation to God’s elect, and He did it with joy, even though He despised the shame. Christ had “joy” in the midst of great suffering, because He knew after His death He would again be with His Father in glory. Christ finished His race, and the goal was to be seated at the Father’s right hand in heaven.

If we Christians will fix our eyes on Christ, we shall be empowered to finish the race. Sufferings and testings and temptations we shall experience along the way, but we shall endure to the end if we will constantly look unto Jesus.

THE HARDSHIPS OF THE RACE - Hebrews 12:3-4

“For consider Him ...” -- The word “consider” means “to give deep meditation to.” In the battle of the Christian life, the believer is to be constantly considering Christ, giving deep thought to His sufferings for the Christian. Our sufferings are but a drop in the bucket compared to the sufferings of Christ.

“... Who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself ...” -- Jesus Christ was mocked, slandered, beaten, spat upon, accused of being demon possessed, and nailed to a cruel cross. He endured all this suffering that He might finish His race and provide salvation for God’s people.

“... so that you may not grow weary and lose heart (faint).” -- In the multiple pressures of life, if the Christian is not running the Christian race by meditation on Christ, there will be a tendency to get discouraged and give up. When pressures come, we tend to get disinterested, slack off, and then quit. We must remember that the Christian life was never intended to be a picnic. Since Christ’s race was rough, so ours will also be rough, because the servant is not greater than his Lord.

Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, says,

If you think it is hard living with the neighbors you live with, or working for the boss you work for, or living with a mother-in-law you have to put up with, I suggest you review again the conditions our Lord faced in his earthly ministry. He had constantly to endure

the stubbornness of men, the recalcitrant, obdurate attitude with which they refused to believe what he said. It was true even of his own disciples. How many times he had to rebuke them for being small in faith, and even for putting stumbling blocks in the path of those who tried to come to him. Again and again he endured the contradiction of sinners against himself.

“You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood, in your striving against sin ...” -- The author reminds his Hebrew-Christian readers that one of them as yet had to suffer by martyrdom. They were being greatly persecuted socially, but no one had given his life; Christ died a horrible death to finish the Father’s race for Him.

CONCLUSION

Saved

Christian, you must never give up in your Christian race. Even though you may feel at times like chucking it all, hang on, do not give up, do not quit. Be a good Christian runner, and run for the finish line with all the strength that is within you. A distance runner, as he comes towards the finish line, has aching muscles, shaky legs, protruding veins, a grimacing facial expression, but he finishes the race to gain the prize. My friends, persevere in your Christian race. Learn to sacrifice, deny yourself, and discipline yourself that you might endure and finish the race. In your race, you may have your stride broken, you may stumble, and you may fall, but get up and keep running, for it is essential that you finish the race. Remember, all true children of God will finish the race. Some will finish first and others last, but all will finish. It is very important whether you finish your Christian race or not, for you are running for Christ, and this has eternal consequences. It was important that you began the race when you trusted in Christ; it is important that you finish the race.

Unsaved

Perhaps you have never begun the race. You are not yet saved. You have never believed in Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. The starting line for you in the race is for you to recognize that you are sinful before God and separated from Him and under His wrath. You must begin to run the race when you turn to Jesus Christ and receive Him as the One who died for your sins and the One who has the right to rule in your life. Christ alone can save you and He alone can put you in God’s race. You must run to Christ before you can run for Christ.