

## RUNNING THE RACE HEBREWS 12:1-3

### I. INTRODUCTION

We are in between sermon series at the moment. We are in the midst of the holiday season, and many from our congregation are visiting family and friends. So I thought that I would postpone beginning a new series until next week.

Since the new year is about to begin, it seems like an appropriate occasion to consider our entrance into a new calendar year. The pollsters tell us that 40% of American adults make a New Year's resolution each year. There is a Christian tradition which relates to this and goes back centuries. The Moravians had a very committed Christian community in Germany in the 1700s. They are often credited with beginning a tradition among some Christians of a Watch Night service. These Moravians spent the night of December 31 in watchful prayer and worship.

John Wesley picked up this idea and introduced it into his Methodist societies. In this country African American churches especially adopted the idea. The founder of the African American Episcopal Church promoted it. Perhaps the most famous Watch Night occurred on December 31, 1862. President Abraham Lincoln announced that on New Years Day 1863 he would sign the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all of the slaves in the Confederate States.

As for New Year's resolutions the Babylonians are the first ones in recorded history to have encouraged this practice. We have evidence of that going back to 2000 BC. Julius Caesar in 46 BC established January 1 as the beginning of the new year. In connection with that he encouraged Romans to make promises of good conduct in the next year.

In terms of American religious practice it was John Wesley who, in conjunction with Watch Night services, established a Covenant Renewal Service as an alternative to the raucous secular activity that marked New Year's Eve festivities even in that early time. Making positive spiritual resolutions were encouraged in connection with that.

So I thought this morning that we might consider one passage of Scripture as we consider our own personal spiritual lives. Perhaps we might consider a resolution to renew our own spiritual lives as we enter this new year.

The Christian life is hard work. It is work that requires discipline and training and perseverance. It is often compared in the New Testament to an athletic competition. It is compared to wrestling and to boxing. The most common athletic metaphor that is used to describe the Christian life is a race. In at least six passages this comparison is made.

I would like to look at one of those passages this morning that compares the Christian life to a race. My intent is to see what kind of encouragement that we might find here in regard to the renewal of our spiritual lives.

## II.

So first let's look at THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE BIBLICAL BACKGROUND) of our passage. The author of Hebrews is not given in this little book. Some have speculated that it is the Apostle Paul. Some have suggested that it could be Apollos who is mentioned in the Book of Acts. It could be someone else.

The more important issue is the purpose for which it was written. My interpretation is that the author wrote this with the purpose of encouraging Jewish Christians living in and around Jerusalem who were faced with persecution and were being tempted to return to their old Jewish religious system. The author talks about how the new covenant and the new high priest of their faith and the new sacrifice that was made are so much better than what was offered in the old system.

In Chapter 10 v. 35 the author encourages these persecuted Jewish Christians (HEBREWS 10:35), saying, **"Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward."** Verse 36 (HEBREWS 10:36): **"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised."**

Chapter 11 then describes the Christian faith that is so essential to the ability to endure. The author describes a number of heroes of the faith in the Old Testament. He mentions Abraham and the other patriarchs. He speaks of Moses and even Rahab the prostitute. (PROJECTOR OFF) He lists judges and prophets. He says that none of these people saw the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. They recognized that this fulfillment was still future.

Thus we come to our passage at the beginning of Chapter 12: **"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, 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. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you many not grow weary or fainthearted."**

## III.

Consider then for a few moments THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND of our passage. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND) Sports were a big deal in much of the Roman Empire in the first century. Greeks and Romans promoted the Olympic games which were held every four years. There were other contests held more frequently in other places. In fact most of the leading cities of the Roman Empire had stadiums where these competitions were held.

(CAESAREA STADIUM 2) One of the better preserved stadiums is in Israel in Caesarea along the Mediterranean Coast, which was the capital of the Roman province of Judea in the first century when the Book of Hebrews was written. The stadium existed in the time of Jesus and Paul. When Pontius Pilate was governor, he lived nearby. The Apostle Paul was held prisoner in Caesarea. So he knew of this stadium.

(CAESAREA STADIUM) The experts claim that these stadiums typically held 30,000 or more people. The kinds of competitions that were held at the Olympics were held in these stadiums. The remains of it have not been found, but from the writings of first century individuals we know that Herod the Great even built one in Jerusalem.

One of the most popular of the athletic competitions was the foot race. (PROJECTOR OFF) The races involved various distances, including the marathon. Typically at the beginning of the race an announcer would give the family name, the country, and the city of the competitor. When the “go” was given, they would take off. If it was a longer race, like a marathon, the runners would leave the stadium. When they returned to it, they would see a stone pillar that marked the finish line. Judges would be stationed there who would award the prize.

The three verses before us make reference to this setting and to the work and endurance necessary for achieving success in the race. The author draws out parallels that he wants us to see in our participation in the Christian life. He wants us to be good runners and to exhibit endurance.

IV. A.

So let's look at THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE RACE. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE RACE) The first requirement, according to v. 1, is AWARENESS OF THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES. **“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”**

The picture that we are presented is a stadium filled with people. They could be spectators who are watching to see how the runners will do in the race. That is a legitimate meaning for both the English word “witnesses” and the original Greek word. But this word appears four other times in the Book of Hebrews, and in each case it refers to individuals who are testifying about something, not to one who is simply a spectator. The context involving Chapter 11 also supports this understanding. The legacy of these heroes of the faith testifies to the current generation that they should continue to run in the race.

These heroes of the faith include rich and poor, married and unmarried, kings, priests, prophets, soldiers, farmers, shepherds, a prostitute, and a murderer. The common characteristic that they possess is a faith in God. They all demonstrated this faith in their perseverance in following God in the face of challenges. They testify to the current generation, “We did it. You can do it, too. Go for it!”

These previous Biblical heroes are like runners in a relay race. They have finished their leg of the race and are handing off the baton to the current generation. They were cheering for them, and now they are cheering for us. Their example is intended to motivate us to run well.

In Romans #15 v. 4 (ROMANS 15:4) the Apostle Paul writes, **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”** Those things that were written include the stories of the men and women of Hebrews 11. They all had hope, and they all endured in the face of difficulties and opposition. We also have examples of the same kind of faith in the New Testament. We have such examples from church history. Now it is our turn. We are in the race. But how will we do in this great race of the Christian life? What kind of legacy will we leave to the next generation?

B.

The second requirement of the race is LAYING ASIDE WEIGHTS AND SINS. (IV.... B. LAYING ASIDE...) That is also what v. 1 tells us. **“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...”**

Runners training for the ancient games often wore weights, like some athletes do today. The extra weights were designed to strengthen the leg muscles and to develop endurance. But by race time these weights would be shed. In fact the runners usually took off all of their clothes so that nothing would hinder their movement and so that they would be carrying no unnecessary weight.

In 334 BC the Greek armies were advancing under Alexander the Great against Persia. At one critical point their success was in doubt. They had become so weighed down with plunder that the soldiers had collected that their effectiveness in battle was lessened. So Alexander the Great supposedly ordered that all of their gathered goods be put in a pile and burned. That resulted in bitterness and complaints. Yet their fighting effectiveness also returned. A historian remarked, **“It was as if wings had been given to them--- they walked lightly again.”**

There was no rule then or now that runners could not wear weights during a race. But if one wants to be a winner, he will get rid of all of the unnecessary weight that he or she can.

So it is in the Christian life. There are many behaviors that the Bible does not specifically prohibit or endorse. There are hobbies and pastimes and relationships that can be a good thing. Some activities in which we are involved may be morally neutral. We Americans typically spend a considerable amount of time in watching TV, in playing video games, in following sports, in cruising the Internet. In our area gambling is a big draw. But if these pursuits require a considerable amount of time or money or unhealthy preoccupation or if they encourage wrong priorities, they may weigh us down. They may keep us from being successful in the Christian race of life. If we are truly serious about

this race, we will have to give up some things, including things that are not necessarily evil in and of themselves, including things that have value and worth.

Also the author says that we Christians need to lay aside “sin which clings so closely.” Many people in the first century wore robes. They served a fine purpose in keeping people warm and protecting them from the elements. But they were not practical for people who wanted to run. Robes are compared to sin. There are things that the Bible specifically says that are wrong. They always hinder us in the race of life.

In Colossians #3 v. 8 (COLOSSIANS 3:8) the Apostle Paul writes, “**But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.**” In James 1:21 the half brother of Jesus declares (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.**” Both James and Paul are speaking to Christian people, to those who have put their personal trust in Jesus. So the issue is not salvation, where we will spend eternity. It is how effective we are going to be in our Christian lives.

In Hebrews #11 the author is focusing on the example of faith that heroes of the Old Testament exhibited. The opposite of faith is unbelief. So the author here in v. 1 of our passage may especially have in mind sins that relate to unbelief, to failure to trust God. The exhortation is to put away unbelief. Trust God and His promises. Get in the race. Run with seriousness.

C.

Also we must run with ENDURANCE. (IV. ... C. ENDURANCE) That is the message of the last part of v. 1: “...**let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.**” The new birth makes all of us runners in the sense that the author is describing. Once we put our trust in Jesus for forgiveness of sins and eternal life, we are in the race. The issue becomes what kind of runner will we be. To be effective we need to have awareness of the cloud of witnesses. We need to lay aside weights and sins. We also must exhibit endurance. Thus it is clear that the race that the author is envisioning is not a sprint. It is a race of a longer distance, perhaps a marathon.

Notice also that the course of the race is set out before us. It is set by those organizing the competition. So it is with the sovereign God. We don't get to pick the course. The circumstances of our birth, our parents, the talents and skills with which we are endowed, and our physical body are all determined by a force outside of ourselves. We do have choices to make along the way. But we certainly don't control all of the events that come across our path. The main issue is whether we will be serious about this race. Will we run with endurance on the course that is laid out before us?

The Greek word for “race” in our text is *agon*, from which we get our English word “agony.” Life for us is a test, a challenge. At times it may seem like agony. It definitely requires endurance. We need to persevere in the challenges that come with a long

race. The course itself presents challenges, and we must also deal with our own limitations and fatigue. Such is the nature of the Christian life.

D.

Then also in v. 2 we are told that the race requires LOOKING TO JESUS. (IV. ... D. LOOKING TO JESUS) **"...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."**

Imagine what it would be like for a runner who tried to run a race while looking at his own feet. It would not be long before he bumped into someone else or veered off of the track, would it? Yet we Christians can be like that sometimes. We try to run the race of the Christian life while focusing upon ourselves. It may be with a sense of pride: "Look at those feet. Look at those nice shoes. Look at what a good Christian I am. Look at how well I am doing at serving God."

Or we may look at ourselves with a sense of dismay: "Look how slow those feet are going. Look at how bad I am. Look at what a failure I am. What am I even doing in this race?"

In actual practice runners have more of a temptation to focus on what other runners in the race are doing. Sometimes they are tempted to look at who is behind them. The result of that is a loss of speed and the danger of getting off of the course. In the Christian life we are sometimes tempted to focus on the people behind us, too. We compare ourselves with Christians who are less mature than we are. While we are gloating that we are ahead of them, we may actually be at the back of the pack, or we may be headed for a big collision up ahead.

On the other hand we may be focusing on the runners ahead of us. We may be thinking, "Woe is me. I am behind all of these guys, and I can't seem to catch them." At the same time we may be oblivious to the fact that we are at the front of the pack and are covering a tremendous amount of ground.

The proper way to run is to fix our eyes on Jesus. If we keep our eyes on Him, we will stay on the right track. The greatest danger in this marathon of life is that we will get discouraged and want to throw in the towel. We may think that it is too hard, that we are expected to do too much.

But if we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, we will see the God-man who endured the cross. The Son of God loved us so much that He was willing to become a human being. He lived a perfect, sinless life. Yet He allowed the creatures whom He created to abuse Him and persecute Him and ultimately nail Him to a cross. He endured the cross, despising the shame of such a humiliating death. He is the one who ultimately experienced success and promises to sustain us in the midst of this marathon of life.

E.

Verse 3 elaborates upon this. The last requirement of this race is CONSIDERING WHAT JESUS ENDURED. (IV. ... E. CONSIDERING WHAT...) Verse 3 tells us, **“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”**

Our situation will never be as bad as the one that Jesus faced. He was the sinless Son of God. He did not deserve His suffering. Yet he was mocked, arrested, spit upon, beaten, and then crucified. Then on the cross He bore the wrath of God against sin. For he was serving as our substitute so that we might never have to bear the punishment for our sin. The picture of our Savior doing this for us so that we might have a wonderful eternity should motivate us to endure and persevere.

In Chapter 11 v. 26 of Hebrews the author is speaking about Moses. (HEBREWS 11:26) He says, **“He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he (Moses) was looking to the reward.”**

The prize for winning a competition at a stadium was typically a wreath of wild olive, laurel, or pine. There was no cash prize or new chariot. But there was the honor and glory that came with the victory. To win the Olympic games was regarded as the greatest accomplishment that any mortal could achieve. Then also there was the gratitude of the city and hometown that a victor would receive. That often did mean significant perks, which varied according to the contest and the nature of the victory.

I do not claim to be an athlete. I have enjoyed participation in a variety of sports over the years. But my best sport in high school was curling, and even then I did not make the varsity team. In college I had a roommate who was a cross country runner. He got me interested in running. I have run three or four days a week pretty much ever since then. Until ten years ago I never competed in a race. I have run for the physical, mental and spiritual benefits. I have never sought out a real, official race.

About ten years ago the church custodian asked if I would run in a race. He had a granddaughter named Brooklyn who had come to Vacation Bible school a number of times. I remember sharing the gospel with her. She indicated that she had a genuine faith in Christ. A couple of years after that she was killed in the home of a friend while the two of them were fooling around with a gun that happened to be loaded. On the first anniversary of her death the family sponsored a 5K run to promote gun safety. So how could I say “no” when her grandfather and the church custodian asked me to run?

Tests and challenges are like that in the Christian life, aren't they? We don't always seek them out. But sometimes they come along our path, and we can't avoid them. In this case I didn't anticipate any difficulty in finishing the race. I normally run a longer distance than 5 kilometers. The issue would be how well would I do in the race.

The race was held at Sunset Park. I did not know the course. I had never been on it. Again the Christian life is like that. We experience tests and trials that are new to us.

The key issue is whether we have developed spiritual habits and traits that will give us some measure of success.

There were 250 runners who showed up for this deal. There were also family members and friends. So it was a fairly large crowd. There were several people who spoke from a platform before the race. There was some waiting around for things to be set. Then the runners were sent over toward the start of the race. I found myself in the back of the pack.

Finally the race started. Clearly many of the runners were not well prepared for the race. Many had not developed the disciplines necessary to succeed in the challenge. Such it is again in the Christian life. Too many Christians have not cultivated the disciplines of the Christian life to handle tests well when they come along.

I started passing slower runners in the race. About two-thirds of the way through the course I started to pass several runners who were taking up most of the asphalt path. As I went off of the path to go around them, I fell. I got up and saw that I had a bloody knee and a bloody hand. A kind runner stopped to see if I was OK. But I shook myself off and got going again. The Christian life is also like that. Sometimes in the midst of trials we get banged up. We don't get through them without getting hurt.

As I got to the end of the course, I did not really know how I had done. There were runners before me, and there were runners finishing after me. Again, as in the Christian life, we don't know what our real evaluation is until we appear before the Eternal Judge.

Reggie, the custodian, saw me when I finished. He brought over a medic to clean up my knee and my hand. There was more waiting. About a half hour later I noticed that my left ankle was swollen. It was sprained. I had some difficulty walking on it.

Finally the awards ceremony began. Awards were given out by gender, starting with the youngest working their way up to the oldest. When they came to men sixty years and older, they announced the top three finishers, and I was first. I hobbled up to the stage with my sprained ankle and blood still dripping from my knee, looking more like I had been in a fight than in a race. I was given the first place award, and the crowd all clapped. The official photographer took my picture. It was nice. It turned out that overall I was 33 out of 250.

Some day we will all face a much more important judgment and evaluation. Jesus was telling His disciples a parable one day. He was describing the situation that will happen in the future when He returns to earth and judges His disciples for what they have done with the resources and opportunities that they have been given. He says this about one who has finished his race well. (MATTHEW 25:21) **“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”**



Is that the kind of commendation that you would like to receive some day from the Sovereign Judge of all? Does that prospect provide sufficient motivation for you to be serious about the Christian race of life? Will that future judgment prompt us to reconsider our priorities? Will it motivate us to be serious about spiritual training, about giving attention to our devotional life, to Bible study, to service, to generous use of our finances, to consideration of helping out with some kind of service in the church or outside of the church.

One of the habits of spiritual life which I have developed is reading through the Bible each year. If you have never done that, perhaps that is a resolution which you could make for this next year. It doesn't really take that long to read about three chapters of the Bible each day. To help you to do that we have some Bible reading guides out in the foyer. Perhaps this might be the resolution that you might make for this next year to help your own spiritual life. If you have never read through the Bible, maybe this is the year to do it.

**“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”**