

Today we study one of the premier Bible passages of our faith – one that has inspired millions of followers of Christ over the last two centuries. May it inspire you today, in your life-long faith-race. Last week we concluded our study of Hebrews, Chapter 11, where we found so many examples and inspirations of faith. Today’s passage really belongs as a final exclamation mark application of that chapter for us. Let us read, study and relish it as God’s personal challenge to “run the race” of faith.

TODAY’S TEXT (NASB)

Hebrews 12:1-3 *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 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. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

THEFORE The “therefore” clearly links this passage to what has gone before – all of the faith-examples of chapter 11, but particularly the last phrase, where we read “apart from us they would not be made perfect.” All those men and women of faith have a particular interest in our performance of faith, for we are all linked together in our mutual quest for ultimate perfection in Christ Jesus. Their faith is linked to ours, and our faith is linked to theirs. In this sense they truly watch us (perhaps not literally, but certainly figuratively) with keen interest, cheering us on by their example and urging us to run our race of faith tirelessly, that we all might all achieve heavenly perfection together.

CLOUD This term used for our “onlookers” is intriguing, for it gives more than one implication of meaning.

- a. First, “cloud” implies an obscurity – that is, they are there, but we can’t see them clearly.
- b. Second, “cloud” has a judicial implication of judgment – that is, they are “judging” our performance of faith by comparing their own performance of faith. Or perhaps a better way of looking at it is that we should be judging OUR faith performance in light of their extraordinary faith example.
- c. Third, this great “cloud” is like a grandstand of onlookers cheering us on to faith in our life-race. This image is meant to be an inspiration and encouragement.

WITNESSES As already indicated, these might not be literally looking at our every move. The implication is better that they are EXAMPLES for us to follow, and in that way their witness of faith is an inspiration to our faith-walk. After all, their personal lives were not all that unblemished, but despite their weaknesses, they each demonstrated a faith that pleased God and earned them a righteous standing. That should inspire. “Witness” is also the same word as is translated “martyr.” They each laid down their life for the sake of Christ, and therefore so should we.

SURROUNDING This intensifies the visual image of a stadium full of onlookers surrounding a race track. In application, it makes us realize that every moment and decision of life is being watched and examined – by God certainly, but also against the legacy of those who have gone before us with successful faith-walks. In other words, we should not just view our forefathers of faith as general examples, but as specific examples in each faith challenge. *“If he/she could be faithful in this, then I can ...”*

ALSO Just as they ran a successful faith-race with the help of God, my challenge is to do the same.

RUN (THE RACE) I skip to examine this word next because it is the verb-command of the sentence. In light of our multiple human examples, this is what we are to do – RUN! Life is not to be just a “hanging out” or a “hanging in there” or a “party” or an “existence.” God tells us that life is like a race to be RUN.

- a. A course has been set
- b. Rules have been established
- c. The prize awaits a successful finish

The Course “Set before us” implies that there is a course set for this life-race. The course is set by God – not by “chance”, or “luck”, or “fate.” The course, like all race courses, includes much ease and joy but also much challenge and hardship. All is to challenge our faith and trust in Him. Part of the “course” is our own personality, our talents and lack thereof, our ethnicity, our inherited privileges or lack thereof and so on. This “hand we are dealt” is also part of God’s chosen course for us to run, and again is to challenge our faith and trust in Him. Jesus characterized this course as the “cross we are to bear” in order to follow Him.

The Prize The prize awaits. This is life eternal in heaven with God and all those who have gone before us in faith. This is life without sin, sorrow or pain. This is abundant life to the full with joy forevermore. To miss this prize is to have eternal regret and eternal separation from this prize. Therefore running the race successfully is critical to our eternal future.

The Rules If we run by the rules we will navigate the course successfully and win the prize. We have come to understand from chapter 11 that FAITH is what runs a successful race. But three keys or RULES to a successful faith-race are given in today’s passage. Mind them carefully. Here is where we will spend the balance of our consideration today in thoughtful application.

3 Rules To Running a Successful Life-Race

1. SHED the LEAD (sin)
2. PACE the RACE (endurance)
3. EYES on the PRIZE (Jesus)

SHED THE LEAD

“let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us”

Every aircraft is designed to be as light as possible for maximum lift. Every race car is designed to be as light as possible for maximum velocity. Every human racer must have as little weight carried for maximum speed. Likewise, every follower of Christ must be as free from sin as possible for maximum effectiveness. The more we take off, the more effective we will be in our faith-race.

So rule #1 is to “shed the lead” - making continual evaluation of those vices, habits, time drains, expenditures and focuses that rob us of our spiritual effectiveness and then confessing and removing them from our life, by the power of Christ. Come on, if Abraham, Moses, David and all the rest were really looking over your shoulder urging you to stronger faith, what would you shed from your life? What chronic attitude tends to “trip you up”? What fantasy tends to “derail” your spiritual momentum? What encumbrance do you need to release to Jesus that He might have more of you?

PACE THE RACE

“and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us”

We all recognize that our spiritual life-race cannot be a sprint, or we will “burn out.” Our race is better characterized as a marathon, for which we need pacing. We are Christians 100% of the time, always on duty for opportunities. But that doesn’t mean we are go-go-go in active Christian service 100% of the time. We need times of quiet, rest and spiritual rejuvenation. The balance is not to languish in rest or burn out in zeal. The challenge is to “pace” our race.

The challenge of pacing also means ENDURANCE. Life often gives us some confusing twists and turns in our faith-walk. God doesn't always reveal the "why" of circumstances – but therein is a test of our trust in Him. God doesn't always give us the "American Dream" version of "abundant life" yet the Spirit within is always producing living water. Again – trust. And as we trust through the difficult portions of the faith-life we grow in ENDURANCE.

We keep running the race. We keep loving our enemies and giving of ourselves to help the less fortunate. We keep supporting our local church and building up the brotherhood with encouragement. We keep holding each other accountable to walk the faith walk consistently and persistently. We keep firmly standing up for the right and lovingly challenging the wrong. We keep trusting God when there are no easy answers or reasons. We run our faith-race with ENDURANCE – never giving up and never giving in. And in doing so we please God with our FAITH.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

"fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith"

When Peter walked on water at Jesus' invitation, he did fine as long as he kept his eyes focused on his Lord. But when his eyes strayed to look at the storm and the water he faltered. The same is true for us in our faith-walk. We must focus on Jesus as our sole purpose and goal in life at all times. When we do, our path is made "straight." (Proverbs 3:9-10). And our walk of faith pleases God.

But the call to fix our eyes on Jesus is also the call to not stray from that fixation. Too many times our eyes look at the stormy waves of seemingly unsolvable problems and the waves of doubt and fear strain our faith. It is then we must remember that Jesus is the "author" or "pioneer" of our faith. He gave it to us to believe in Him and we will give it to us again and again to trust in Him. We must also remember that Jesus is the "perfecter" or "sustainer" of our faith. When our faith wavers we must reach out to Him and His Word to give us more – enough to still all fears and doubts. *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ"* (Romans 10:17) must be carved on the back of our eyelids so that we focus ever on Him, the source of our faith.

FOLLOW THE RULES

When these 3 rules of running a successful faith-race are followed we, like Jesus, will be able to endure our cross, despise the shame and have joy in the midst of trial. And, like Jesus, we will endure to receive the ultimate prize of "well done" as we enter our heavenly resting place.

CONSIDER JESUS

The first command of this passage was to "run" (the race). The second and final one, in verse 3, is to "consider Jesus" – another way of saying that we must keep our eyes focused ever on the prize of Jesus. And when we do that, it is like taking "super-spiritual vitamins"! For we are promised that *"you will not grow weary and lose heart."* Think of it: No spiritual exhaustion! No spiritual discouragement!

Other fixations of life can become boring or give less appeal over time. But a spiritual fixation on Jesus is ever fresh. And as Jesus told the women at the well: *"whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."* (John 4:14)

Just as the saints of old carved a legacy for themselves and an example for all those who would follow, so we too are carving our spiritual legacy every decision of every day. And, we are carving an example for those who follow us to emulate.

May all who come behind us, FIND US FAITHFUL. May the fire of our devotion light their way. May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe, and the lives we live inspire them to OBEY. Yes,

may all who come behind us FIND US FAITHFUL.

I conclude with a reading of our passage from “The Message”, a fresh paraphrase of the Scripture.

Hebrews 12:1-3 The Message (MSG)

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!