

Running to the finish
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“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Heb 12:1-3

The text we have selected for today’s Bible study is a well-known passage taken from the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. The text does not contain deep theological thoughts, but it gives practical advice on how to live our Christian lives. In the limited time that we have, I want to suggest to you certain principles that are found in the text we are considering. Regardless of who the author of the letter is, he challenges us to live our Christian lives and carry out our Christian ministry based on simple examples that are easy to understand. The author uses as illustration a race that is run in front of spectators with a precise goal in mind, and in order to achieve the goal we are also instructed as to how to run the race. The race he uses as illustration is not a sprint run with the intention to break a speed record, but is rather a marathon, where the important thing is to finish the race.

My daughter Vicky, who many of you know, suffered a terrible accident when she was 4 years old, an accident that left her paralyzed and unable to speak for years. Many years later, after arduous therapy and training, not only did she recover her physical abilities, but she became a good tennis player. After high school she had the chance to turn pro and she took one of the best professional tennis trainers as coach. But then she decided not to pursue tennis as a way of life. When people asked why she didn’t go professional, she would respond, “I didn’t pursue it this far to turn into a professional player; I did it to prove to myself that I could overcome my physical problems.” We all like stories of people who run the race to the end, this is why this passage is important. Paul said at the end of his life **“I’ve kept the faith. I’ve finished the course.”** Finishing the race is as important as starting it, and here the passage tells us how to run so we can finish. Let’s look at the elements of this race.

I. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” is telling us that we run the race in front of an audience.

The word "therefore" is here used to link what follows with the previous passage, where a number of people are listed as examples of faith. The cloud of witnesses is here to encourage and to give inspiration from their own lives.

We may see in the crowd Abraham, who may say to us, “The Lord told me to leave my country and my family and go to a place that I didn’t know. But He also asked me to do the unthinkable when He asked me to give up my only son. At that moment I did not understand that He was testing me.” There will be times when you will feel discouraged because you don’t know where the Lord is taking you. But Abraham is called the father of faith because was able to act in spite of these doubts. I say repeatedly that doubting is not wrong, but acting based on your doubts is.

We may also see in the crowd Noah, who was told to build an ark, but then he had to wait 120 years to see a reason for building the ark. How many times do we want to see fulfilled immediately the end result of what the Lord has told us to do? The presence of Noah in the crowd is telling us that things will be done according to God’s timing.

There is also in the crowd Joseph, who for no apparent reason ended up in Egypt’s dungeons; yet the Lord used him to bring the children of Israel to Egypt.

Moses had run away from Egypt, and he was 80 years old when the Lord told him to take His people out of Egypt. Moses tried every excuse for not doing it: that he was a wanted man, he was old, he couldn’t speak, that he had no recognition. But Moses was reminded, and we are to be reminded, **“I am who I am.”** and the great **“I am”** will guide us to the goal line.

In our own time we see the previous generation, there are people watching us, people who led the way for us to be here today where we are. I am so grateful that in these conferences we are reminded of those who came before us: Rabinovich, Lichtenstein, Leopold Cohn, Bukzbazen, Victor Sedaca, Eliezer Urbach, Moshe Rosen, Zola Levitt, Harcourt Samuel. And if we listen to their words of encouragement, we hear them saying to us “I know it is hard, but carry on. If I was able to do it, you can do it too.” When you are about to give up, listen to the crowd saying to you, “Don’t give up, but look at the prize and the reward.”

If I can say something that perhaps is not written but is implied in the text, it is that in the crowd of witnesses there are also a number of people who will be coming after us, who are looking at us for inspiration. There is a younger generation who will learn from the way we have run the race. Things are different, but we realize that there are others who are watching how we are running the race. We need to be inspired by those who have gone before us, but we must also keep in mind that at the same time, others are looking for inspiration. We should never discourage, but be of inspiration to someone else. People are inspired by those who run and win; losers and quitters are quickly forgotten.

II. Running the race is not easy, therefore “let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”

But starting the race is not the same as finishing it! The text also gives us advice on things we need to do in order to make sure we finish the race. My oldest son is both a marathon runner and a mountain climber. I’m always impressed by his achievements, but

also by the training that he goes through. He is a career diplomat and while he served as Special US Representative to El Salvador, he climbed the sixth highest peak in the world. I've asked him what the most difficult part in mountain climbing is. His reply was that there are two critical moments. When you have finished all the training and are ready to start your climb, you ask yourself, "Am I truly ready?" And then halfway through when you are tired, you ask yourself if you have used all your energy or if you can reach for what you have left to finish the climb. This passage clearly indicates that starting the race is not as simple as it seems. There must be preparation. Part of that is to throw off everything that hinders. Things that hinder us are not necessarily things that will stop us from running, but they will make it difficult for us to run as we ought to. It may be lack of focus, misguided priorities, old habits, giving way to half truths, et cetera.

Moreover, the text says that there are things that entangle us. This is basically sin. There is a difference between something that blocks and something that entangles. An obstacle can be seen and is avoidable. But things that entangle us, things that start to creep in and grow in our lives, perhaps seem innocuous initially; but if left unchecked, they may entangle us to the point of hindering us from running and reaching the goal.

III. "**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith**" tells us the best advice on running the race to the finish.

Keep your eyes fixed on the one who set the standard, Jesus. He is the example of how the race must be run, but He is also marking the goal line we must reach. Looking at the races in the Olympic Games, we can see the level of concentration the runners have. They do not allow themselves to be distracted by anything, but their eyes are fixed on the goal line. A good example is also found in the incident mentioned in Matthew 14:23-31, when Peter is able to walk on water. The key for doing the impossible was keeping his eyes fixed on Jesus; as soon as he saw the reality of the water and the waves, he began to sink. Jesus' reply wasn't "You were foolish for trying what only I can do," but "Why did you doubt?" Fixing his eyes on Jesus enabled Peter to do what was impossible.

Jesus had many reasons for not completing His task to the end, but He sets the example of commitment and endurance. In Gethsemane He asks the Father, "If it's possible, let this cup pass from me." In other words, He was asking the Father if He could quit, yet He knew that the only way to accomplish His mission was by going to the Cross. Jesus' goal wasn't the Cross, but the Resurrection and victory that came as a result of His death on the Cross. "**Who for the joy set before him endured the cross.**" The key word here is "endurance." Yes, there are times when we ask if all the efforts and time we invest in reaching the Jewish people are worth the aggravation. Jesus endured because He saw the prize ahead, "**and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**"

The Apostle Paul tells us his own experience and it's my prayer today that we also can say with Paul, "**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.**"(2 Tim. 4:7) It's interesting that Paul links the thought of finishing the race with keeping the faith. Faith is the energy, the source of strength that we need to run and

complete the race. The reason the author of this exhortation in the letter to the Hebrews instructs us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus is not only that He is the example and the goal, but most importantly, because as we are running the race, He is our source of strength. The passage uses two words: “author” and “perfecter.”

What does it mean that Jesus is the “author” of our faith? The word here translated as “author” is the Greek *Archeegón*. This word not only implies creator or author, as the first who did it, but also the best who has done it, the model, the captain, the champion of faith. Sometimes we harbor the idea that faith is something that we need to create in order to relate to God, while the passage clearly indicates that Jesus, God incarnate, is the one who created it and gives us the amount of faith needed to run and finish the race.

The other word is “perfecter,” better translated as “finisher.” The word here translated in some versions as “perfecter” and in others as “finisher” is the Greek *Teleiooteén*, which basically means to carry something to completion. Not only will Jesus provide us with the power we need to run, but He is the one who makes it possible to finish the race.

Conclusion:

We are called to live for and serve the Lord. In the Bible we find many analogies as to what this is similar to. Sometimes it’s called a walk, but in this passage it is compared to a race. No race is simple or easy. The Lord never promised us that serving Him will never require effort, faith or preparation. What this passage tell us is that the prize is worth it. Most importantly, is that we are not alone. We have those who have run the race before us and reached the goal; we have the example of Jesus, who ran and endured to the end. He is here giving us strength to run by giving us the measure of faith we need. But He also is there showing us the goal line. He is holding in His hands the prize which the Father will award to all of us who finish the race. To God, how you start in life is not as important as how you finish it. Again, in the words of Paul, “**Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all that have longed for his appearance.**” 2 Tim. 4:8

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