

THE RACE OF FAITH HEBREWS 12:1-2

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Throughout the New Testament, the athletic contests of the Greeks provide a common analogy for living the Christian life. Paul, in particular, likens the life of faith to those competing within the rules of their game in order to win the prize, or the victor's crown (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7-8). This is an important emphasis, reminding us all of the need for single-mindedness, determination, and perseverance in our Christian pilgrimage.

This is precisely the point of our author in this well-known passage of Scripture. By using the analogy of a long-distance marathon, he is encouraging his readers (and us) to press on despite the hardships and difficulties that are set before us. The need for such encouragement should be obvious, as the Christian life is not some leisurely stroll down the yellow brick road! (Cf. Heb. 10:32-34)

The connecting link between these verses and the preceding chapter is evidenced by the all-important "therefore" at the beginning of v. 1: Given the past examples of faith (ch. 11), we are now encouraged to run with endurance the race of faith. It's also important to note that in the Greek text, this is the only exhortation that appears within these verses: "Let us run with endurance the race for which we are entered" (NEB). Surrounding this singular exhortation are several modifying clauses, designed to answer the questions *why* and *how*. When seen in this light, this is a highly motivational and practical passage of Scripture. There's something here for everyone!

A. The Exhortation: "Let us run with endurance . . ." The word that is translated "endurance" is the same word that is elsewhere translated "perseverance" (10:36, NIV). In the Greek text, it is a compound word; the first part is a preposition that means "under;" the second part is a word which in its verbal form means "to abide," or "to remain." The call to persevere, therefore, is the call to *remain steadfast under trial*. Please note well: this is one of the predominant themes within Hebrews. Given his readers' previous perseverance through persecution (10:32-34), our author is continually encouraging them (and us) to remain steadfast to the end (3:6, 14), with the goal of inheriting the promised salvation (2:1; 4:1, 9-11; 6:11-12; 9:15; 10:19-39; 12:12-17). *Saving faith proves itself through perseverance.*

B. The Motivation: ". . . Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . ." These are the Old Testament heroes of the faith in chapter 11, as indicated by the "therefore" in 12:1. But in what sense are they "witnesses?" "Not, probably, in the sense of spectators, watching their successors as they in turn run the race for which they have entered; but rather in the sense that by their loyalty and endurance they have borne witness to the possibilities of the life of faith. It is not so much they who look to us as we who look to them – for encouragement. They have borne witness to the faithfulness of God . . ." (F. F. Bruce, Hebrews)

C. The Explanation: How do we go about running this race of enduring faith?

1. By keeping our weight down: “Laying aside every weight” Serious competitors must divest themselves of all superfluous weight including excess bodily weight. Likewise in the Christian life, there are many things which may be perfectly all right in and of themselves, but which hinder us in the race of faith. What may be a hindrance to one may not be a hindrance to another. Each of us must learn for himself what is a weight or hindrance – and then, lay it aside. This is unquestionably one of the essential disciplines – and challenges – of the Christian life.

2. By keeping our limbs free: “. . . and the sin which so easily entangles us” Our author is probably not referring so much to some specific, besetting sin, but to sin itself. Any sin will inevitably encumber the runner’s feet and trip him up before he has taken more than a step or two, with the real danger of putting him out of the running altogether. Let’s never forget our author’s previous warning about sin’s deceitfulness (3:13); it comes with built-in, ready-made lines of rationalization. Surrendering to them results in a hardening of the heart and a reduced sensitivity of conscience. Hence, there is an ongoing need for a repentant lifestyle.

3. By keeping our heads up: “. . . looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” When we look to the Old Testament saints, we do find incentives in abundance. But we also see their failures and weaknesses. In looking to Jesus, however, we focus on the One who is “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5), *par excellence*. Let us therefore follow the example of Jesus. He ran the race of faith from the beginning to the end. He endured the cross and despised its shame because He too was looking forward to His reward – the joy which was set before Him (i.e. the redemption of His people). Having pioneered the path of suffering on our behalf, He is now our guide to glory, as He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. He entered first so that His people, through enduring faith, would be sure to follow (6:19-20)! Our author, therefore, would be in perfect sympathy with the promise given by our Savior to the Church at Laodicea: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” (Rev. 3:21)

Patient the appointed race to run,
This weary world we cast behind;
From strength to strength we travel on,
The new Jerusalem to find;
Our labor this, our only aim,
To find the new Jerusalem.

Charles Wesley