

MOVING ON TO MATURITY
Running the Race of Faith
Hebrews 12:1-2

Introduction

We're all in a race. Whether we are athletic or not, if we are believers in the Lord, we are all in a race of faith. Unlike track & field competitions, though, we are not competing against one another. Our Father God, in front of whom we perform, would delight to reward us all, commending us as all as champions. And unlike other races in athletic competitions, the racetrack we each run is individually chosen, specifically designed, and uniquely configured for our own spiritual development. Hebrews 12 encourages us to "run with endurance the race that is set before us."

The length of the racetrack varies among us. For some the race is a quick dash from saving faith to physical death. I once received a phone call from a man I used to work with in the insurance adjusting industry. We had been friends, but as I entered full-time into pastoral work, we lost touch. He called me from the hospital where he had just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He said he needed to make peace with God. I went to his room, explained the Gospel, and Dan Berry put his faith in Christ. His racetrack from Saving Faith to Seeing Glory lasted four months.

For others the length of the racetrack seems relatively long. Bill Wecks was saved while still a boy, and now he's 93. That seems like a long track, but compared to eternity, any difficulties he has had are "momentary, light afflictions."

Which reminds me of another way the track differs among people: not only does it vary as to length, but it also varies as to difficulty. Some people appear to have smooth turf. Others have a path strewn with rocks and pitted with puddles.

*Some through the water; some through the flood
Some through the fire, but all through the blood.
Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song
In the night season and all the day long.*

So, you see, we are all on the race of faith. God, for whom we all run, is sovereign over the length and difficulty of the course. But God coaches us how to run like champions. In Hebrews 12:1-2 he tells us to keep watch in three directions. To run the race that is set before us we should look back at heroes, look out for encumbrances and entanglements, and look up to Jesus.

"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."

1. Look back at heroes

God's Word first mentions the need to look back at the heroes of the faith. *"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."*

The many individuals who have been examples of faith to us are called here, a "cloud of witnesses." Some have mistakenly assumed this means those who have died are leaning over the balcony of heaven as witnesses of us—that they are watching us clear the hurdles or fall on our faces as we run the race. But, no, the idea expressed here is not that they are witnesses **OF** us, but rather they are witnesses **TO** us. Their lives are teaching us although they have already passed away. As is said of Abel in chapter 11:4, "though he is dead, he still speaks."

Who are the heroes of the faith you look at? Whose lives speak to you about the value of living full-on for the Lord?

[Scripture Reading Duet of the Honor Roll of Faith]

You noticed, did you not, that the examples of Men and Women of Faith in this reading does not end in Hebrews 11:40. You have modern-day trailblazers—and I don't mean Brandon Roy—who show you how to dunk over demons and fast break for God. These modern-day heroes may be people you've observed in life—grandparents, mothers, dads, brothers and sisters; youth leaders, Sunday school teachers, pastors, mentors—who live in front of you now or who have already died, leaving you the legacy of their memory. Or, these modern-day heroes may be people you've never met, but you've read about them in biographies—missionaries and Christian leaders whose lives inspire us to follow Christ more passionately. Hebrews 12:1 calls these men and women a great cloud of witnesses to you, shouting in unison, "run with endurance the race that is set before you!"

[Pause to remember one of your heroes of the faith, reminding yourself of what their witness to you said loud and clear.]

2. Look out for encumbrances and entanglements

Not only are we to look back at our heroes, but as we run the race of faith, we are to look out for encumbrances and entanglements. Verse one puts it this way: "let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us."

If we are going to end the race of faith as a champion, we're going to have to be serious about what we are about. Did you see any of the Beijing Olympics? I was cheering for fellow-Oregonian Galen Rupp, competing in the 10,000 meter event. I've asked one of our teens to impersonate Galen Rupp as he came up to the starting line.

["What do you think your chances are? What if I added this to your shoulders? (as I lift a weighted back-pack onto his shoulders)? Do you still think you can do well? Well, how about if I strap this belt around your ankles? What are your chances now?"]

Fortunately, Galen Rupp did not add encumbrances and entanglements. He went on to finish 13th in the 10,000 meter event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics with a season-best time of 27:37.

As we Christians prepare for the race of faith, we are to be as serious about competing successfully as an athlete focused on the Olympics. After all, “they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable (1 Cor. 9:25).” The Olympic athlete’s glory, even if he wins, is short-lived.

The believer running the race of faith may have to make short-term sacrifices to obtain eternal reward. Hebrews 12 urges us to *lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us*. The author seems to make a distinction between encumbrances and entanglements of sin. It is obvious we should not be involved in sinful behavior while trying to run the race of faith. We cannot run the race if we aren’t even walking in the Spirit.

But encumbrances are more difficult to discern. These are activities, choices, behaviors that are not necessarily sinful in themselves, but nevertheless, weigh us down from being our best in running the race of faith. What would those be for you? For me it might be spending too much time watching pro football games on Sunday afternoon. For me it might be eating too many bowls of ice cream and not enough bowls of vegetables. What is it for you that—though not sinful in itself—becomes an encumbrance to being a champion in the race of faith?

[Pause for the Holy Spirit to point out what might be an encumbrance and entanglement for each person and to ask his help to shrug off the pack and circumvent the entanglement.]

3. Look up to Jesus

The third instruction for running the race of faith is to look up to Jesus. “*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.*”

As Christians, we cannot go wrong when we look at Jesus. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. In other words, he is the one who starts it and completes it. And he is our Example of how to endure hard times.

As Jesus approached the end of his earthly life, he saw two things clearly. He was the agony on the Cross, and he saw his heavenly Glory beyond it. John 17 gives us a glimpse into the thoughts of Jesus as he approached his death. In that prayer is recorded the only request Jesus ever asked the Father for himself: “*Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me (John 17:24).*” Jesus had a clear view of the Glory he had awaiting him in heaven.

But he also saw the cross close-by in front of him. And he trembled in horror from it, wishing he could avoid it. Remember the Garden of Gethsemane as mentioned in Hebrews 5:7? In agony, “*he offered up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death.*”

How did Jesus encourage himself and find the tenacity to trudge forward to be beaten, nail-pierced, spit-upon, and cursed? How did he find the strength to die for our sins, while the Father turned his back on the Sin-Bearer?

It was because of the joy he saw awaiting him on the other side of the Cross. *“Who for the joy set before Him, he endured the cross, despising its shame, and (now) has sat down at the right hand (the place of honor) of the throne of God.”*

If the track God has providentially placed you on has agonizing stretches, what are you to do? You are to do like your Example Jesus did. Look for the joy or relief on the other side of the trial. Perhaps you are scheduled for a regimen of chemotherapy. It will be difficult, excruciating, debilitating. But you look through the trial to the joy of healing on the other side. You are willing to endure pain because there may be relief beyond, after the pain. Oh, but what if there is no remission on the other side of the surgery or chemo? Is there not still a joy on the other side of the trial? You bet there is. There is joy in heaven. If the trial we face during our earthly race kills us, or pains us for the rest of our earthly life, we still can look ahead—just like Christ did—to the joy ahead in Glory for those who run well the race of faith. *“Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”* (Philippians 1:20-21).

We know an eternal reward awaits those who finish well their race of faith—look back at our heroes, look out for encumbrances and entanglements, and look up to Jesus.

Conclusion

As we come today to the Table of Communion, let us again pause in silent meditation and prayer. After a minute or so of silence, come forward as you feel led, to partake of the bread and juice in remembrance of the Lord’s sacrifice for you. By participating in Communion, reaffirm your participation in the race of faith. Now, during this time of quiet prayer, consciously thank Jesus for his willingness to endure the Cross and to despise the shame. Thank Him for providing a way to forgive your sins and to rescue your soul. Thank him for being your Example and giving you the strength to go through any earthly trial.