

## Hebrews 11:39-12:4

### Running the Race

*...let us run with patience the race that is set before us – 12:1*

It's been a while since I reminded you that the epistle to the Hebrews is identified by Paul as an exhortation. *And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation; for I have written a letter unto you in few words (13:22).*

We've seen up to this point in the epistle a number of exhortations:

- Heb 4:1 *Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left [us] of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.*
- Heb 4:11 *Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.*
- Heb 4:14 *Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast [our] profession.*
- Heb 4:16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*
- Heb 6:1 *Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,*
- Heb 10:24 *And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:*

It's no wonder this epistle is called an exhortation. Throughout our studies in chp. 11, however, we found no specific exhortations. Chapter 11 has been a different kind of chapter in this epistle. We've met up with all of these characters in the Old Testament that lived by faith. And we've looked at these characters with the question in mind: *What does it mean to live by faith?* It seems that each particular character has been able to provide us with valuable instructions in the area of faith but now as we come to chp. 12 we discover that all these Old Testament characters come together in one united voice to formulate the grounds for the exhortation that we find in 12:1.

Look at what it says in 12:1 – *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...* All of the characters in chp. 11 that we've been studying over the last number of weeks are now called a *great cloud of witnesses*. We sometimes wonder, don't we, just how involved or interested those who are in heaven are in what takes place in this world below. This verse seems to indicate that they do take an interest. Listen to the words of Albert Barnes on this verse:

*The apostle represents those to whom he had referred in the previous chapter as looking on to witness the efforts which Christians make, and the manner in which they live. There is allusion here, doubtless, to the ancient games. A great multitude of spectators usually occupied the circular seats in the amphitheatre, from which they could easily behold the*

combatants. In like manner the apostle represents Christians as encompassed with the multitude of worthies to whom he had referred in the previous chapter. But lest we read too much into the verse Barnes goes on to say: *It cannot be fairly inferred from this that he means to say that all those ancient worthies were actually looking at the conduct of Christians, and saw their conflicts. It is a figurative representation, such as is common, and means that we ought to act as if they were in sight, and cheered us on.*

And the argument that Paul is making from this vast cloud of witnesses is that we, like they, should run the race that they ran. *Seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with patience the race that is set before us.* It's interesting to note, isn't it, that the race we are to run is designated as a set race – *a race that is set before us.* That certainly indicates to us that God himself is the One who designed the course of this race. And while each course has much in common with every other course, I believe it is true, nevertheless, that each one of us here runs a particular course that has been specifically set before us by God.

And so what I want to do this morning is to call your attention to this exhortation that encompasses all of chp. 11. We could view this exhortation as a theme: the theme of running the race.

## Running the Race that is Set Before Us

If we are going to heed the exhortation and run that race then there are a number of things we need to keep in mind that will enable us to run that race effectively. Consider with me first of all, that if we're going to run that race effectively:

### I. We Must Know the Nature of the Race

What exactly does Paul mean when he exhorts us to *run with patience the race that is set before us*? He's not now speaking of a literal race, he is speaking figuratively. You might say that this figurative use of a race strengthens the argument for Paul being the author of this epistle because he uses the same figure in some of his other epistles. And by looking at the uses of this figure a picture emerges that helps us formulate the exact meaning of the term *race*.

For example – in Gal. 5:7 Paul writes to the Galatians: *Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?* We've noted in earlier studies that the situation among the Gentiles of Galatia was very similar to the situation of the Hebrew Christians. Both began well but both were in danger of straying off the course.

In this example from Galatians we see a close connection between running well and obeying the truth. *Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?* The plain implication is that before they were hindered they were obeying the truth. Their *run* so to speak was their obedience of faith.

Picture a cross country running course in which the path is level and smooth. The runner comes to a fork in the path. The pathway to the right appears to continue to be level and smooth while the pathway to the left takes the runner up a very steep mountain that is impossible to scale. The Galatians were on the verge of taking the impossible path. So were the Hebrew believers about to go back to an impossible path.

It is impossible, you see, to gain God's favor through our own merit. It is impossible to please God or serve God in the power of our own flesh. Such notions run contrary to obedience to the truth. Obedience to the truth, you see, means obedience to the gospel and obedience to the gospel means the only merit I have that can gain God's acceptance and God's favor is Christ's merit.

I have an illustrated version of Pilgrim's Progress that was designed for children which is called *A Dangerous Journey*. The illustrations in this book are very graphic and one illustration, in particular, is very striking. It's the scene where Christian meets Mr. Worldly-Wiseman and Mr. Worldly Wiseman is advising Christian that if he wants salvation and if he wants God's favor he must scale a mountain. And in the scene behind Worldly Wiseman you see that this large, steep, and imposing structure that would be impossible to scale, a structure that looks like it's about to fall over and bury the person that would attempt to scale it.

If running our race entails scaling such a mountain then running the race truly is way beyond us. So we must run the race by recognizing the right path. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Our running must be grounded in what he has accomplished for us in his atoning death.

This is not to say that our path is level and smooth and easy. In 1Cor. 9:26 Paul makes reference to running again. *I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air*: Here the figure of running is equated to another figure – that of fighting. And the truth that emerges from the use of these figures is that we do meet resistance in our efforts to run the race. There are spiritual forces to oppose us and deceive us. And if we would run the race before us effectively, then we must make good use of our spiritual endeavors and not simply *beat the air*.

Albert Barnes has an interesting comment on this notion of beating the air. *There is often among Christians very little aim or object; there is no plan; and the efforts are wasted, scattered, inefficient efforts; so that, at the close of life, many a man may say that he has spent his ministry or his Christian course mainly, or entirely, in beating the air. Besides, many a one sets up a man of straw, and fights that. He fancies error and heresy in others, and opposes that. He becomes a heresy-hunter; or he opposes some irregularity in religion that, if left alone, would die of itself; or he fixes all his attention on some minor evil, and devotes his life to the destruction of that alone. When death comes, he may have never struck a blow at one of the real and dangerous enemies of the gospel; and the simple record on the tombstone of many a minister and many a private Christian might be, "Here lies one who spent his life in beating the air."*

Our running the race, therefore, also encompasses our spiritual warfare. May the Lord help us to fight effectively and choose our targets wisely. I'm afraid that all too often the targets that are chosen among fundamentalists are those whose ministries appear to be larger and more fruitful than their own. In a spirit of jealousy they beat the air but fancy themselves to be among those that are truly contending for the faith.

Our run, then, has to do with the obedience of faith and has to do with our spiritual warfare. In a similar vein it has to do with our service to Christ. Back in Galatians when Paul makes reference to his visit to Peter and the Apostles in Jerusalem he writes in Gal. 2:2 *And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain.*

Here the connection is between running and Paul's ministry of preaching the gospel. It is certainly a part of our race that we so serve Christ by making the gospel known. Everything we do should lead to that end. Your reasoning should be – I want to work at my job as best I can and I want to be upright and conscientious in my work so that I might gain the opportunity to speak a word for Christ and when I gain that opportunity I don't anything in my life to hinder the message that I would endeavor to convey.

Listen to how Paul expresses the same thing to the Philippians in Phil. 2:14-16 *Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain.*

Here Paul's running is equated to his labor, and not just to his efforts in his labor for Christ but in the fruitfulness of those efforts. If Paul's running of the race was done rightly, he says, then the Philippians would stand true. They would be blameless and harmless. They would shine as lights in the world and they would hold forth the word of life.

Do you begin to see, then, the nature of the race that we engage in? It encompasses the obedience of faith, it encompasses our spiritual warfare and it encompasses our service to Christ. If you are truly in the race, then you will live to serve Christ – you will live to propagate his gospel – you will live to follow after him not in the power of the flesh but in the truth of the gospel and by the Spirit of God.

We see, then, something of the nature of the race. Would you consider with me next that if we would run with patience the race set before us:

## II. We Must Adopt the Right Strategy for the Race

We find in the verses we've read this morning a number of things we can adopt in our strategy for running the race. The first part of our strategy consists in laying aside a couple of things. Note again the words of v. 1 *let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.*

We are to lay aside every weight. This word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. The meaning is that we lay aside anything that would slow us down. Can you imagine a race in which all the runners are lined up at the starting line? They are all crouched down with their feet in the blocks ready to spring forward at the gun except for one runner who is standing straight up and is holding a 50 lb. cinder block. How quickly will he get out of the blocks? And how effectively will he be able to run?

The idea, then, is that the Christian lays aside anything, no matter what it is, that would hinder him from running. Again Barnes notes in his commentary that *It is not the same thing in all persons. In one it may be pride; in another, vanity; in another, worldliness; in another, a violent and almost ungovernable temper; in another, a corrupt imagination; in another, a heavy, leaden, insensible heart; in another, some improper and unholy attachment. Whatever it may be, we are exhorted to lay it aside; and this general direction may be applied to anything which prevents our making the highest possible attainment in the divine life. Some persons would make much more progress if they would throw away many of their personal ornaments; some if they would disencumber themselves of the heavy weight of gold which they are endeavouring to carry with them. So some very light objects, in themselves considered, become material encumbrances. Even a feather or a ring — such may be the fondness for these toys — may become such a weight that they will never make much progress towards the prize.*

The apostle Paul would part from everything and count it but dung that he might win Christ. So must we keep a loose grip on anything in this world that comes between us and the kingdom of heaven. We must lay it aside. And then note also that not only are we to lay aside every weight but we're also to lay aside sin — *the sin that doth so easily beset us.*

When I look at such a phrase as this I can't help marvel at how pointed and sharp the word of God is and how it finds us exactly where we are. Paul doesn't say lay aside the sin that once in a while gets the best of you — the sin that you are usually able to wage war against and keep it subdued but on rare occasions manages to get the best of you. No — Paul says *lay aside the sin that doth so easily beset you.*

We don't need prolonged and intense self-examination to discover these sins. They're the ones that are readily at hand and the ones that easily overcome us. They pull us down — they keep us defiled — they rob us of the joy and peace that ought to be our portion. They're the sins that make us wonder if we've exhausted the grace of God for we find ourselves pleading the blood of Christ over them time and again.

Set them aside along with the other weights that keep us from running the race effectively for Christ. So this is the first part of the strategy — laying things aside. The next part of the strategy is that we look to Christ. Note the words of v. 2 — *Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.* You're aware, I'm sure by now, that this is a recurring exhortation in Hebrews. Back in 3:1,2 we were exhorted to *consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus, Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house.*

Recall, if you will, that the bulk of this epistle to the Hebrews is expound for us the superiority of Christ. He is better than angels. He was better than Moses. He was of a better priesthood than the Levitical priesthood. His sacrifice was a better sacrifice because he himself is the sacrifice.

Now we're called upon in 12:2 to look to him and in 12:3 to consider him. And especially are we called on to consider him when we think our own trials are severe and quite beyond us. He endured such contradictions of sinners against himself which amounts to saying that he was perfect and upright and innocent and they were guilty, defiled and rebellious sinners that took and nailed him to Calvary's cross.

Would you note in v. 3 that the reason for considering him is *lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds*. This ties into the next part of the strategy for running the race. Our text tells us that we're to run the race *with patience*. A race that must be run with patience is a long race. There's an altogether different strategy in the realm of track and field between the 100 yard dash and the mile run. The hundred yard dash is a sprint from start to finish. The mile run must be done by pacing yourself so you can complete the race.

So in the race that is set before us – it is a race that lasts all our lives in this world below. You might say that the finish line is the Jordan river. When we cross Jordan in death then we've finished the race. So it's a race that must be run with patience and the way our patience is maintained is by looking to Jesus and considering him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself.

Consider who he has and what he's done for you. Consider that he lived a perfect life and died a perfect death. Consider that he is your substitute and Covenant Head. Consider that he bore God's wrath so that you might know God's blessing. He died that you might live. And he reigns today that you might reign with him. This is our strategy then for running the race. We must lay aside every distracting element and look to him.

It's so simple that it becomes easy to forget. It's so plain that we think we have to make it more complex. We must keep our eyes on Christ and this ties closely into the last point I want to leave with you. If we would run an effective race:

### III. We Must Draw from the Right Motivation

From what I've said already we can say, of course, that Christ is that motivation – salvation is that motivation – forgiveness of sins is that motivation – everlasting life is our motivation. But could I point out to you what I mentioned in my introduction from v. 1 – *We are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses* – there's yet another motivating factor.

Now I know that it's easy to view the saints of the Old Testament and come to wrong conclusions about them. We are tempted to conclude that they were great men in and of themselves. We think, with regard to them, that they're exceptional and that there's no way I could ever rise to the standard that they set.

I don't believe that's how we're supposed to view them. We certainly don't want to turn a blind eye to the great exploits they did but don't you notice when you read your Old Testament that by and large they are revealed to be men and women of like passions as we are.

We find Noah laying drunk in his tent. We find Abraham and Sara thinking they have to manipulate the promise of God by Sara giving her handmaid to Abraham to have children by her. We find Jacob, a supplanter; We find Moses who sinned and was kept from entering the promised land. We find Samson who lived for sin and for self much of the time and we find David whose lusts and whose pride overcame him.

The point being – we find these characters in the Old Testament to be sinners just like we are – but they are sinners that were saved by grace and they were sinners who faith in Jesus Christ. The thing we should see about these Old Testament characters is that they demonstrate God's faithfulness to his people and God's faithfulness to his promises.

This is what we should see as we behold this great cloud of witnesses – God was able to bring them through and the same God is able to bring you through as well – so never stop believing in Christ. Never stop availing yourselves of his throne of grace. Never lose sight of the promises of salvation and never lose sight of what Christ has done to bring about so great salvation.

This is how we'll run the race and finish the race with strength. We'll consider what God enabled others to do and we'll look to Christ ourselves. We'll consider what contradiction of sinners he endured and how he prevailed and in the joy and peace of salvation we'll run the race before us with patience.

May God help you, then, to run the race. I trust this morning that you're in the race and that it's the right race. The world, you know has a race of their own. And they think it strange that Christians don't run with them to the same excess of riot. I trust you're in the race and that it's the right race.

And I trust that you'll adopt the right strategy for the race. Lay aside every weight – lay aside every sin especially the sins that easily beset you and keep your minds and hearts stayed upon Christ. May he enable us all to endure and to patiently look ahead at what our portion will be in him when once we cross the finish line.