

Running the Race Before Us

Hebrews 12:1-2

I invite you to turn with me this morning to Hebrews 12. Hebrews 12. This is a very familiar section of Scripture to you, but I want us to take a fresh look at it this morning. We'll be looking at the first few verses.

The Bible is full of metaphors. Many of these metaphors emphasize different aspects of the Christian life. The Christian is compared to a soldier, an athlete, a pilgrim, a farmer and so on. Each of these metaphors is designed to emphasize some quality of the Christian life that is to be cultivated by every Christian.

Now, this morning, I want us to look at the metaphor found in Hebrews 12:1-2. The central concept of these two verses is that **the Christian life is like a race**. Everything else in these verses stands in support of the writer's exhortation for the audience to "Run the Race God had laid out for them." This was a key concern for him....He wanted these people to stop slacking and to start running their race well.

The Hebrews, it seems, had begun to grow cold and over time, they had become sluggish and were no longer running well. They needed to straighten up and get back in the race. So the writer of Hebrews calls them to be diligent, and to run the race...and to run it well.

That same call, to run well, extends to us today.

Now, I'm not sure if you are aware of this, but 2020 has been a particularly difficult year. And I would not be surprised if along the way you and I have grown a bit slack in our effort to honor the Lord by running our race well. So we stand in need of a reminder, of a call, to renew our resolve to run the race well. No matter your age, if you are the Lord's, you are called to run the race God has laid out before you, and to run it well. That is, to run in such a way that you will actually win the prize.

But the question is, HOW DO WE RUN WELL? What do we need to do in order to run in such a way as to win? Well the writer of Hebrews gives us four keys for running well, and I want us to look at them one by one this morning.

Let me give them to you quickly, then we will work through them.

1. Remember the Past
2. Beware of Hindrances
3. Consider the Course
4. Look to Jesus

We will see these four points as we look at Hebrews 12:1-2 together. So if you would stand with me as we read God's word.

The letter of Hebrews is really more of a sermon than a letter. And we can gather from the sermon that the people being addressed were not doing well. They were most likely Jews who had left Judaism to follow Christ. Having left Judaism they would have been severely disdained by their own friends and family – and cut off from social events as well as cut off from their families at large.

It cost these dear people everything when they decided to follow Christ. This intense persecution after following Christ had went on for a season, and then had died down. But, at the time of this sermon, there seems to have been a rise in the intensity of the persecution. You can almost see them squirming under the intensity as you read the book of Hebrews. It was a HARD situation.

But there was an easy OUT for them if they wanted it. In this case, there was an EASY Button. If they would just return to Judaism, they would get their families back and could ease some of the difficulty of life. That was it. LEAVE the “so-called” new religion, and the suffering would end.

This desire for relief was exerting a powerful pull on many of the Hebrew Christians. And the preacher's desire for them was that they would endure the persecution — endure the difficulties, and continue to press on and follow Christ.

In order to help them persevere, the writer of Hebrews reminded the Hebrews of a few fundamental truths:

1. The first fundamental Truth was that: **Jesus is far superior to anything and everything.** He made Christ's superiority the main point of his entire sermon. We see this theme throughout the whole letter:
 - A. In chapters 1-4 we see that:
 - i. Jesus is superior to both the Angels AND Moses.

- ii. And that Jesus OFFERS a superior “rest” for God’s people.
 - B. In chapters 4-7 we see that:
 - i. Jesus is the superior High Priest
 - C. In chapters 8-10 we see that
 - i. Jesus’s priestly ministry is superior on the grounds that
 - a. He has enacted a better covenant – in a better sanctuary – by virtue of a superior sacrifice. – Namely, the sacrifice of Himself.
 - D. So, the preacher wanted these struggling christians to know that: IN EVERY WAY Jesus is far superior to the old system – So don’t go back to what is inferior to escape persecution!! To leave Jesus, to go back to Judaism would be the height of folly. Jesus is the best, and those who are with him, are united to all of his superior benefits.
 - i. That’s the first fundamental truth.
2. The second fundamental truth was that — Not only is Jesus superior to other ways, BUT he is the ONLY WAY to salvation. The preacher reminded the Hebrews that **there was NO salvation outside of Jesus Christ**. To leave Jesus and return to Judaism was to cut oneself off from any hope of salvation. In fact, he took it even further and said that if these persecuted Christians were to leave Jesus and return to Judaism it would be as if they were recrucifying the Messiah – As if they were trampling the Son of God under their feet. If they did that, they would lose any hope of salvation. This is the synopsis of the harsh warnings we see throughout the book of Hebrews (2,3,5,6,10, & 12).
3. So Jesus is superior, He is the Only way to Salvation, and the third fundamental truth was this: **throughout history the people of God have ALWAYS faced disheartening circumstances**. In other words, LIFE has always been HARD for God’s people. It has never been easy. You should not be suprised that life is hard! BUT, God’s people have ALWAYS endured hardships by FAITH. We see this truth unpacked in Hebrews chapter 11. In this chapter, he gives a panaromic sweep of Old Testament history that highlights the enduring faith of the Old Testament saints.

Now, Hebrews 11 is one of the greatest chapters of the Bible. We know it as the Hall of Faith. How do you follow such a chapter? What do you go to next?

Well, the preacher follows it with these words: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us 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.**”

He calls them, in the face of their difficulties, to RUN the RACE God has set before them. And NOTICE the first thing that he mentions about running the race: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.”

1. Remember the Past (12:1a)

- a. **Here is his point, and its point #1:** If you are going to run the Christian race well, you need to **remember that you are “surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses” who have already run the race before you.**
- b. What is this “cloud of witnesses”?
 - i. Well, the figure of a cloud was used to describe the massive crowd’s that would gather to watch events during the first century. The athlete would look up and see the people in the amphitheater as if they were clouds around him. Here, the word simply refers to a large group – a crowd. And the crowd of witnesses are those faithful believers catalogued in Hebrews 11.
- c. But, why are they called “witnesses”?
 - i. Well, some have taken this to mean that the figures of Hebrews 11 are witnesses in the sense that they are SPECTATORS. They sit in the stands of Heaven and look down on us as we run our race. This is possible...But I think it misses the real point the preacher is trying to make.
 - ii. Let me show you what I mean:
 1. The men and women of Hebrews 11 are brought forward to the Hebrews as models, as example of what true faith looks like. If we were to walk through the life of each figure we would see a similar pattern.
 - a. An individual received a promise.
 - b. The circumstances of that individual seemed to contradict God’s promise.

- c. Yet, despite their contrary circumstances, the individual took God at His word. They believed God’s promise. And Obeyed.
- d. EXAMPLE: ABRAHAM
 - i. Promise: God came to Abraham with a specific promise that Sarah would bear a child.
 - ii. Contrary Circumstance: Abraham and Sarah were “as good as dead.”
 - iii. Faith: Abraham took God at His word, and continued to believe God’s promise.
- e. This is the same sort of experience the Hebrews were having. In fact, its the same sort of experience you and I have every day.
 - i. WE have been given extraordinary promises from God.
 - ii. OUR circumstances often seem to discredit those promises.
 - iii. We have to fight to believe God – to take Him at His word. Right? That is the fight of Faith.

iv. So in this sense, the figures of Hebrews 11 are examples to us.

- 2. But NOTICE. The preacher does not say we are surrounded by a cloud of “**examples**.” BUT a cloud of “witnesses.” And what are they witnesses to?
 - a. When Abraham took God at His word, he ventured out on God’s promise and lived as if what God had said was absolutely certain.
 - b. Now the question is, DID God end up making a fool out of Abraham? Did God end up being unfaithful to His promise to Abraham?
 - c. Answer: NO! Abraham took God at His word despite his circumstances AND God delivered! God came through! God did EXACTLY as He said!! That is what God does. He is faithful and he always comes through on His word.
- 3. And SO, when the writer of Hebrews says we are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses”...HE means that we have in our view (in the past) a long catalogue of people who have demonstrated for us – time and time again – that God is FAITHFUL to His word! TRUST HIM! He is relentlessly faithful. And the lives of the OT saints bear witness to us that God is trustworthy. When we trust Him and follow Him (regardless of our circumstances)– He is always faithful.

- iii. John MacArthur encapsulates this truth well: “Seeing how God was with [the saints of Hebrews 11] encourages us to trust that He will also be with us. The same God who was their God is our God. The God of yesterday is the God of today and tomorrow. He has not weakened, or lost interest in His people, or lessened His love and care for them. **We can run as well as they did.** It has nothing to do with how we compare with them, but in how our God compares with theirs. Because we have the same God, He can do the same things through us if we trust Him.” We have the same faithful God as them!
- iv. When I was in college I took a tour of Southern Seminary. One of perks of that tour was that the grand finale was going to Al Mohler’s house for desert and a tour of his massive library. And I remember being so nervous about meeting him...So we did the tour of his home and library, and the last part of the tour was shaking his hand on the way out. And I remember shaking his hand, turning around to walk out of the house and thinking. You know what, he is just like me. We are weak, sinful men who serve a great and faithful God.

Point: This is the point. This is what we have to know if we are going to RUN the race well. **We have to remember the past** – because in the past we see the long line of witnesses that testify to us of God’s unrelenting faithfulness. We can run well because God has proven Himself to be faithful.

Second, if we are going to run our race well, we must beware of hindrances.

2. **Beware of Hindrances** (in Your own life) (12:1b)

- a. Notice the next thing he mentions in verse 1. “Let us also lay aside every encumbrance [weight] and the sin which so easily entangles us.”
- i. In the first century, a runner, or athlete, would typically strip down to almost nothing in order to have every possible advantage over his opponent. Even now, the best athletes keep strict diets and are always looking for some way to have a leg up on their opponents.
 - ii. No serious athlete goes out to run a marathon with a book back on their back. This is just common sense. But when it comes to running the Christian race, we seem to lose sight of this basic strategy of laying aside things that hinder us from running well.

iii. The writer of Hebrews gives us two types of hindrances which you must lay aside if you are going to run the race well.

1. The first he calls “encumbrances” or “weights.” This refers to anything that would hinder you from running the race. These are simply impediments. We could call them excesses. (IN fact the word referred to excess clothing or BODY fat). These are things that are NOT necessarily sinful, but will slow you down in the race.

a. And the writer of Hebrews doesn't give us a list of what these encumbrances are. He leaves it open-ended.

b. He leaves it to us to examine ourselves, to see what sort of weights we have around us as we are trying to run the Christian Race. So, we MUST examine ourselves.

i. The thing about the weights that keep us from running the race well, is that we take them on without even realizing it.

c. If you have not examined yourself recently, I would say that you have likely taken on weights this year that you need to lay aside. If you are not careful, these encumbrances will hinder you from running well – and if you do not run well, you will not receive the prize.

i. “We cannot win if we are weighted,” said Spurgeon, “The pace will have to be very swift, and we cannot get to it, or keep it up, if we have weights to carry. Unloaded, we shall find the race taxing all our powers; BUT weighted, we shall be doomed to failure.”

d. We've got to lay aside any excess, so that we can run the race well.

e. Let me give you a tool, a question, to help you analyze what the encumbrances in your life might be:

i. Take anything you do in life and ask: “Does this help me to run my race better?”

- ii. If the answer is NO, then it has the potential of being a hindrance, an encumbrance in your life.

 - f. Let me give you another challenge: Before you make a purchase/Before you make any commitments this year, ASK:
 - i. Will this help me to run better?
 - ii. Will this slow me down?
 - 1. This can be as simple as the purchase of a pet, or a new property. – Will this help me to run better?
 - iii. Will this thing increase my speed, or drag me down?
 - iv. Will this help me serve the Lord better in my brief life? Or hinder me from the work God has given me to do?

 - g. We need to ask ourselves these questions and be ready to lay aside any encumbrance that hinders us from running well.
2. In addition to weights, there is a second hindrance: The preacher says that the Hebrews must “lay aside *the sin* which so easily entangles us.”
- a. The nature of sin is to ensnare. And if sin is not laid aside in your life, it will entangle you and keep you from running well.
 - b. “To Entangle” refers to something that has “tight control over us.” The more we become an ally with sin in our lives, the tighter it's grip on us. Sin entangles and does not let go. And if we are not fighting against its influence, we will fail to win the race.
 - c. It's like running a race with your shoe laces tied together. It's not going to work.
 - d. Sin wants dominion over you. And if it can it will ensnare and entangle you and ruin you. (Romans 6:12-14).

 - e. So I would challenge you: Look at your life. Where have you become comfortable with sin? Have you made an ally with any sin in your life? I would exhort you this year, this day, to renew your effort against entangling sin.

- f. Don't make an ally of any sin in your life – commit, with God's help to lay it aside today. You cannot win the race if you are entangled in your sin.

Point: There are two types of hindrances that will keep us from running well. The general excesses of life and the sins we have made friends with in life. Every Christian should carefully examine his life to see where the excesses are that are keeping him from running well – And to see where sin has gotten a hold in his life, and with God's help to go to war against it. If we fail to do this, we will not run well and we will not win the prize.

So, if we are going to run our race well, we need to remember the past, we need to beware of hindrances, and third, we need to **consider the course**.

3. Consider the Course (12:1c)

- a. I'm convinced that many of us do not run the race well because we are unaware of the type of race we have been called to run. By looking at some Christians you would think the course is more of a casual stroll than a serious race.

b. Marathon

- i. Notice the last part of verse 1, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." To run with endurance implies a sort of long distance race. A marathon. The word is ἀγών – where we get the word agony. It speaks of "engaging in intense struggle...against strong opposition." It could refer to wrestling, boxing, or some other athletic event. But in this context, he is talking about a race. It's a race marked by intense struggle. It's a race that is HARD and seems like it may never end.
- ii. And he says, it's the "race set before us." The imagery here is of an athlete, coming up to the starting line, and looking out before him. In front of him he sees the course laid out. "The race set before him." He is able to analyze it and calculate how he is going to run. There is a certain strategy involved. It requires planning and thoughtfulness. He knows that the race itself will not be easy. He will be taxed...stretched further than he has ever been. If he doesn't calculate the course well, he will not be able to finish the race.

1. I remember one off-season in high school, our coach called all the football players out to the track. When we got out there the long distance guys were on the track training. One of these guys was from a family of olympic athletes and his specialty was long

distance. And I remember our coach looking at us and asking, “Which one of you wants to challenge him to a race?” Well, we could have all beat him in a sprint, but the challenge was for the mile. I had no desire to run a mile, but the fastest guy on our team stepped up and accepted the challenge. And I remember them taking off and thinking...this poor, slow long distance runner has no chance...And it looked like he didn't until about half-way through the race when my friend, collapsed and had to be carried off the track.

2. He was a 100 meter guy. He ran sprints not marathons. He miscalculated the type of race and he wasn't able to finish.

iii. Friends, we have got to consider the type of race God has set before us. We should be under no illusion that it will be easy, or that we will be able to stroll through it. If we are going to run well, and we should all be resolved to run well, we need to remember that to run the Christian race requires the discipline and strategy and carefulness of a skilled athlete.

iv. Now if you are thinking I have not been running well, then friend, as long as you have breath you can begin, with God's help to run well. Don't quit because you've ran poorly so far. Determine with God's help to finish well. It's a marathon, and there is still time.

v. The key is that we are to run the race with **ENDURANCE**. That is, we are to bear up under the difficulties and be steadfast. It is not speed that is the key...its endurance.

vi. The Hebrew Christians had begun to lose sight of the type of race they were called to run. They had begun to moan about the difficulties, and look for ways of escape. The preacher would have them to remember that the race is a marathon. It is long and arduous. It is not a stroll in the park. They needed to renew their resolve to run well!

Point: So let me ask: Are you running the race in such a way as to win the prize? Have you considered the type of race God has called each of us to run? It is a marathon. It will be difficult and it requires endurance. How are you strategizing to win the race?

Followers of Christ have a course to complete and we must exert effort in the Christian life if we are going to win. The type of effort is a sustained effort that goes the distance – it is a dogged determination. If you failed to

run well last year, don't give up! Don't be discouraged by your race so far. The race is not over! Be resolved, with God's help to run better this year!

And if we are going to run better, we need to **remember the past**, we need to **beware of hindrances**, we need to consider the **type of race** God's called us to run, and **FOURTH, we must continually look to Jesus.**

4. Look to Jesus (12:2)

- a. Look at verse 2, "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."
 - i. To "fix your eyes on Jesus" is to look to Him without distraction. It is to turn away from everything else, and to focus on Jesus.
 - ii. That may sound like a total contradiction to all that I've been saying about self-examination. But it's NOT.
 - iii. Let me show you what I mean.
 - iv. If you are trying to run the race and you have a preoccupation with yourself, your trial, your surroundings, or on other Christians – you will not run well.
 1. We don't want to be *preoccupied* with ourselves – A healthy examination of how we are running is what we need. But just as quickly as you are through examining yourself — look to Jesus.
 2. The Scottish pastor, Robert Murray M'Cheyne's advice is helpful here. He said, "For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ." That's great advice. If we look at ourself we will find ample reason to quit running. We will be distracted and ineffective.
 - a. So, don't fixate on yourself -- look to Christ.
 3. We also don't want to be *preoccupied* with other Christians. If we are looking around at where everyone else is in relationship to us, that can also be discouraging. We want to learn from our brothers and sisters, but if we focus all of our time comparing ourselves to them, we will not run well.
 - a. Get your eyes onto Jesus – focus on him.

v. What do we see when we look to Jesus? What do we find in Him? Well certainly we find all we could ever need. But the writer of Hebrews wants us to see something very specific. That is, when we fix our eyes on Jesus we will find the one who is both the “AUTHOR & PERFECTER of faith.”

1. First, He is the AUTHOR (αρχηγός)

- a. This term can mean Author, Founder, Originator, or LEADER – In this context, the idea of LEADER or Trail Blazer or Pioneer makes the most sense. Jesus is the one who blazed the trail for us to run. He is the first to complete the course and is the Chief Example for us to follow.
- b. Thus, we look to him as the object of our faith – He has gone before us, and we are to follow him! He is the pace-setter. We run behind Him.

2. Second, Jesus is the PERFECTER (τελειωτής) of FAITH

- a. The word refers to “one who brings something to a successful conclusion.” The consummator, or finisher.
- b. Jesus is the one who not only pioneered the trail for us to run, but he ran in such a way as to bring to a full conclusion the work of faith. He, perfectly abided in the Father’s will, and carried out the work God had given him to the extent that on the cross he could say, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The work was done.
- c. He is the great perfecter of faith – And His victory makes it possible for us to even Run the Course!

b. How is this the case? How is he the AUTHOR and PERFECTER of faith?

- i. Well, look at the next part of verse 2, “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. If faith is the ability to look beyond the current contrary circumstances to the promised reward of God, then Jesus exercised faith perfectly.
 - 2. “For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross”
 - a. What was the Joy before him?

- i. Certainly, it was the joy of sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God – that’s how he concludes verse 2. This is the climax of His work on the cross – “sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God. That coincides with Psalm 16:11, “At your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”
 - ii. But along the way. On His way to the exalted right hand of the Father, Jesus found joy in accomplishing the Father’s perfect will. And that will was to reconcile sinners like you and me to Himself. **The Son’s delight was to do the will of the Father – That is, the Son’s delight was to reconcile you to God.**
- b. For that JOY, “he endured the cross and despised its shame”
- i. He endured the cross – the cross upon which the reconciliation of sinners to God was accomplished. In the face of the cruel, excruciating, prolonged, suffering of the cross – Jesus maintained his course to do the Father’s will and reconcile sinner to himself – all for the JOY set before Him.
 - a. He “despised its shame” – that is, he despised the shame of the cross.
 - b. Jesus treated the shame, scorn, and derision of the cross as if it were nothing – In English, the word “despise” can carry the idea of bitterness – that is not the idea here. Rather, it is the idea of “disregarding” it. It means to treat something as if it had little value. That Jesus “scorned”/ “despised” the shame of the cross means that he treated it as insignificant or of little consequence. It was NOTHING in light of the JOY of accomplishing the Father’s will or reconciling sinners to God!

So, if we are to run well, we MUST fix our eyes on Jesus – He is the goal – He is the reward we must continually gaze at. But Jesus is more than the goal and prize; He is also the LEADER, The Trail Blazer who has finished the race with victory. The Cross did not deter Him from running the race and gaining the victory

BECAUSE he set his eye on the joy that could only be obtained by enduring the shameful cross. By His victory, He became the source of faith and salvation for us all. Our faith is from Him. Jesus is the both the source and the object of our faith!

The Joy set before Jesus was the Joy of having accomplished the Father's will of redemption and being seated at His right hand. In completing the course, he purchased our salvation. And if you are going to run well, you have to see that your standing before God is not grounded upon your ability to run well – but upon the finished work of Christ – the consummator of true faith. We run our race, always looking to him as the example, but also as a constant reminder that our victory is only possible in Christ's victory. His Victory is ours, by virtue of our faith in Him.

Yet, His victory does NOT nullify our responsibility to run – it energizes it!

Conclusion

So, if we are going to run well, we need to Remember the Past, We need to be aware of Hindrances, We need to consider the Course, and we need to fix our eyes upon Jesus.

- How did you run in 2020? How will you run in 2021? How will you plan and strategize to win the race? To run it well?
- There are, at present, far too many people loafing on the track. With God's help, resolve to run well – to remember those who have run already, to lay aside hindrances, to mind the nature of the race, and to fix your eyes on Jesus. Time is short, and eternity is long. Do not waste this brief moment called life – Do not squander any more of this precious commodity. Do not linger any more – get up and run the race for the glory of God! Run in such a way as to win the prize!

May the Lord help us to run well.