

Run With Perseverance
 Hebrews 12:1-4
 August 21, 2022

There is a legendary tale about the late Bear Bryant, who coached the University of Alabama football team from 1958 to 1982. In one game, with two minutes to play, he called on his slow-but-steady, fourth string quarterback. Bryant instructed him to run the ball up the middle and then punt. However, the new quarterback stunned the opposition with repeated first-down runs. Deep in his opponent's territory, temptation overcame instruction. He had never had an opportunity to throw a touchdown pass. So, disregarding his coach, he threw the ball. The opposing safety intercepted and broke into the clear. The sluggish quarterback struggled to find his feet, but he started chasing the fastest man on the field and tackled the safety just before the goal line. The gun sounded. The game ended. The opposing coaches met at mid-field. Bryant's competition shook his head in disbelief. He said, "How could a fourth-string quarterback catch my swiftest safety?" "That's easy," Bryant responded. "Your man was running for a touchdown. My man was running for his life." (1)

The Bible says that we are in a race which God wants us faithfully to complete. God has a race for each of us. Your race is not my race and my race is not your race. Just as we are unique so is our race. "God does not call every believer to do the same things in life. However, He does call every believer to persevere, to finish his or her particular race well." (2)

Os Guinness talks about his last visit to John R. W. Stott three weeks before Stott died. Guinness calls Stott whom he had known over many decades, "one of the greatest Christian leaders of the last century." Of that last visit, Guinness says, "After an unforgettable hour and more of sharing many memories over many years, I asked him how he would like me to pray for him. Lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, he answered in a hoarse whisper, 'Pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath.'" (3)

That was always one of Billy Graham's greatest concerns. He prayed that he and his ministry would never be an embarrassment to the Lord. Although he did have a couple of controversies in his nearly eighty year-long ministry he was faithful to Jesus until the end. We also need to be faithful. How can we be?

Our scripture helps us out. A good place to start is studying the lives of the faithful that have gone before us. Our text says, "We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses." (Hebrews 12:1) These are not merely spectators in the stands but people of faith. One of our best sources for witnesses of faith is the Bible. Hebrews chapter 11 just before our scripture is an account of people of faith who bore witness to the mighty works of God in their lives. They form the foundation upon which the Old Testament is built. Among them are Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Samuel, and David. These

were all commended for their faith which sustained them in life. From the New Testament are Peter, John, Paul, Luke, Lydia, Mary – Jesus’ mother, and of course Jesus. Learn about them--read your Bible. Over a period of fifteen years, I read several hundred biographies of which nearly one-hundred and fifty were stories of Christians. Some were stories of saints in the Bible but most were of modern-day folks who had a witness to share. By reading the stories of others and their faith as they depended upon God to see them through tough times, they inspire us to keep going and our faith is strengthened. If you want to finish your life well, take time to learn about the witnesses of the past.

The next step is to take off everything that weighs you down. Get rid of those things that keep you from doing your best for the Lord.

When I was in seminary, I worshiped at Lewis Center United Methodist Church in Lewis Center, Ohio. It was about five miles from the seminary. It was a typical rural Methodist church which looked very much like ours did four years ago. One Sunday morning I had the children’s sermon. I put the heaviest winter clothes I owned on Billy Byrd, the 4-year-old son of my next-door neighbor and my best friends, who also worshipped there. When I was done, he could hardly move. Billy was my illustration for the boy David before he went out and killed Goliath. We find the story in 1 Samuel chapter 17. Verse 38 tells us that Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on Saul’s sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. And in verse 39, “I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So, he took them off. My friends, we know the rest of the story. David took his staff and five smooth stones from the stream and put them in his pouch. With his slingshot he approached Goliath. Using one stone he killed him. David took off what hindered him and went to work for the Lord God.

One of the greatest tools of Satan in our world today is business. He keeps us so busy with non-essentials that we push the essentials to the back burner. “Too much time on social media takes time away from real relationships with real people, especially our own families. (Having to deal with) too much debt takes away resources that could be used to support the church or other worthy causes. Too many scheduled activities in the week saps your energy to do those things that are really important in life: things like time alone with the Lord, reaching out to a neighbor, or doing ministry. None of these items are necessarily ‘bad’ in and of themselves. ... They’re just weights that wear you out and slow you down. They keep you from finishing the race God laid out for you. So, if you want to win that race and finish your life well, cut back on some of those things; take off anything that weighs you down.” (4) As I have said several times over the years, “If you are too busy for Jesus. You are too busy.” Take stock of your situation and get your priorities in order.

And third if you want to finish the race of life well, focus on Jesus! Hebrews 12:2 reads, “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.” Jesus is both the founder and finisher of our faith. He blazed the trail for us and will help us on our race.

Nabeel Qureshi was a Muslim, who became a follower of Christ. He had a Muslim friend, named Sahar, who was attracted to parts of Christianity, but couldn't accept the idea of God becoming a human being. On one occasion Sahar honestly asked Qureshi, “How can you believe Jesus is God if he was born through the birth canal of a woman and that he had to use the bathroom? Aren't these things beneath God?” Qureshi affirmed her questions and then asked her one in turn: “Sahar, let's say that you are on your way to a very important ceremony and are dressed in your finest clothes. You are about to arrive just on time, but then you see your daughter drowning in a pool of mud. What would you do? Let her drown and arrive looking dignified, or rescue her but arrive at the ceremony covered in mud?” Her response was very matter of fact, “Of course, I would jump in the mud and save her.” Then Qureshi asked her another question: “Let's say there were others with you. Would you send someone else to save her, or would you save her yourself?” She responded, “If she is my daughter, how could I send anyone else? They would not care for her like I do. I would go myself, definitely.” Qureshi said, “If you, being human, love your daughter so much that you are willing to lay aside your dignity to save her, how much more can we expect God, if he is our loving Father, to lay aside his majesty to save us?” God’s willingness to despise the shame of becoming a man and enduring cross eventually won Sahar's heart. As Qureshi reported, “The message of God's selfless love had overpowered her, and she could no longer remain a Muslim. She had accepted Jesus as her Savior.” (5)

Let the message of God’s love overpower you. If you are not certain where you stand with the Lord, accept Christ as your Savior. We talked about this two weeks ago in Bible study—there must be a point in our lives when we say “yes” to Jesus. God wants you to say “yes” to his Son. Trust Jesus with your life. He is both the founder and the finisher of your faith. Jesus has blazed the trail and invites you to follow him. Walk with him, talk with him, work with and for him and live in the confidence he gives that no matter what comes your way you are secure in him. Jesus says in John 10:10, “I have come that (you) may have life and have it to the full.” Life today, tomorrow, and forever is Jesus’ gift to you.

Our scripture continues, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful man, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Jesus is our motivation to persevere. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that, though his readers have struggled against sin they are yet to shed their blood. (Hebrews 12:3-4)

When Hebrews was written around 65 A.D. Nero was emperor of the Roman Empire. He hated Christians and blamed them for the fire of July 64 A. D. which destroyed much of Rome. It was probably set by his order because he wanted to rebuild the city to honor him. As punishment for supposedly setting the fire, first century Roman historian Tacitus wrote about the Christians (They) “were doomed to the flames and burnt to serve as nightly illumination when the daylight expired.” (6)

Martyrdom was a reality for the readers of Hebrews and the writer tells them to remain steadfast in the faith and not grow weary. When we consider the hostilities Jesus faced and his work on the cross for our benefit, he is our motivation to persevere. I don't believe that any of us will become martyrs for our faith, but we are to remain faithful.

Pastor Bryan Loritts talks about sitting in a doctor's office with one of his young sons. The nurse needed to draw blood from the boy for a test, but the boy wouldn't let her. He told his dad, "I can't do it. I just can't do it." The nurse said, "Here's the deal, buddy. We've got this numbing spray. We'll spray the numbing spray on you, and then we'll stick the needle in you, and you won't even feel it." But the boy kept saying, "I can't do it. I can't do it." Finally, Pastor Bryan said to the nurse, "Ma'am, I know what I'm about to ask you may be out of bounds, but can you stick me first? Can you do it without the numbing spray? I just need to show my son." She responded, "Yes, I'll do it. We'll keep this between us." So, Pastor Bryan put his son on his lap and said, "Watch Daddy." Then he rolled up his sleeve and stuck his arm out. The nurse stuck him and drew blood. A smile came over his son's face. Yes, he was still a little nervous, but when he saw that Daddy already went through what he was about to go through, with no numbing spray, he stuck his arm out. It gave him courage. (7) Jesus gives us the courage we need to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Recall the words of a hymn we have come to know and love; Turn your eyes upon Jesus; Look full in His wonderful face, And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. (8) And so, they will.

Amen.

- (1) Pastor's Manual, T. T. Crabtree, Zondervan, 1985, p.259
- (2) Sermoncentral "Winning the Race of Life" C. Philip Green August 15, 2018 p. 1
- (3) Os Guinness, Impossible People, IVP Books, 2016; [www. Preaching Today.com](http://www.PreachingToday.com)
- (4) Sermoncentral "Winning the Race of Life" C. Philip Green August 15 p. 3
- (5) Nabeel Qureshi, No God but One, Zondervan, 2016, pages 100-101; www.Preaching Today.com
- (6) Tacitus Annuals 15.44. (7)
- (7) Bryan Loritts, "The Great Exchange" preached at www.PreachingToday.com
- (8) "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus" Helen H. Lemmel United Methodist Hymnal 1989 p. 349