

Our Wednesday Bible Class has been studying an overview of the Bible in which we examine one book at a time; we started with Genesis and are now in 1 Peter. I have enjoyed this because it has given me the opportunity to read and study books that I have not looked at in a long time. As I noted last Sunday, we just completed a study of the Book of Hebrews. Last week, we discussed the fifth chapter of Hebrews; let's look at another chapter this morning.

As we discussed before, the Apostle Paul was a great sports fan, and he and many other New Testament writers used running as a teaching illustration. This morning let's see what the writer of Hebrews has to say about running for Christ in the eleventh chapter starting with verse 29 and continuing to the second verse of the twelfth chapter.

Read Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

A man and his wife were arguing about who should make the coffee each morning. The wife said: "Since you get up first, you should do it." To which her husband replied: "But you do all the cooking; it's your job!" His wife countered: "No, it's your job; it says so right here in the Bible." Then she opened her Bible to the New Testament and pointed to our text "He-brews."

When you ask most people who have studied Hebrews what they remember about the book, their most likely response will be "Chapter 11, The Faith Chapter." "Faith of our Fathers" that we sang earlier remains one of the favorite hymns of the church. Chapter 11 provides us with an impressive overview of biblical faith, from those who passed through the Red Sea all the way down to the martyrs of the early church; it's a hall of fame of Biblical characters. The writer of Hebrews alluded to many individuals in biblical history who had "run with perseverance the race set before them."

A scene near the beginning of *Forrest Gump* sets the stage for the rest of the movie. As a young boy, Forrest had to wear leg braces to help straighten his back. Bullies would pick on him and his friend Jenny. One day as they were walking home from school, the bullies suddenly came up behind them riding bicycles, and Jenny called out that famous line: "Run, Forrest, run!" As he hobbled along in his braces trying to escape the bullies, all of a sudden, a dramatic scene occurred. As Jenny shouted words of encouragement in the background, his leg braces began to pop off and he built up speed. Forrest was off and running for the rest of his life. Maybe this movie scene will help us interpret these wonderful words, especially those at the beginning of Chapter 12.

The first word in Chapter 12 "therefore" takes us back to the previous chapter. The previous chapter had highlighted the roll call of faith. Now that the history has been given, the writer reminds us that we are "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The *Message* puts it this

way: “Do you not see what this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on?” We have a cheering section of saints who have gone on before us and prepared the way, like our most recent saints – Frankie Harper, Barbara Gatzweiler, Glen Nesbitt, Bill Claybrook and others. They challenge us to be faithful as we run our race of faith. They assure us that we are not alone as we seek to serve and follow Jesus Christ.

At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, the cheering section made all the difference in finishing the race. As the gun sounded for the start of the 400-meter race, Derek Redmond of Great Britain had great hopes of winning the gold medal. But as he entered the backstretch, Redmond fell to the track with a torn hamstring. By an act of sheer will, he struggled to his feet and began hopping toward the finish line. Suddenly Derek’s father jumped out of the stands and ran past a security guard. He threw his arms around his son. In a voice choked with emotion, he whispered: “Come on, son, let’s finish this together.” The crowd cheered and wept as they watched the father half-carrying his wounded son down the stretch and across the finish line.

Our cheering section may be heroes of the Bible or the Christian church, or it may be made up of family, friends, and church members who have helped shape our faith. We can see their faces and hear their voices as they cheer us on and surround us. Now shouldn’t the church be the place where a “great cloud of witnesses” gathers to cheer and encourage one another in the faith? The Apostle Paul exhorts us in 1 Thessalonians 5:11 to encourage one another and to build each other up. As we discussed last Sunday, this is your spiritual home and we are called to help each other grow in our walk with the Lord. Are you taking advantage of the many opportunities that the church provides to help you grow spiritually? Does this church help you along in your race? Are you doing your part to cheer others on? We run best when someone is cheering for us, and also running alongside us.

If you have ever watched a track meet or a race, you see that the runners carry as little weight as possible – wearing the least and most comfortable clothing. This is something that the Army never heard of in my day. When I was at ROTC camp at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, between my junior and senior years in college, we sometimes ran with full packs and rifles, and always in combat boots. You never realize how heavy those boots are until you have to run a mile in them in the heat of summer.

Now the only way to run the race of life with perseverance is to get rid of the excess baggage that we are carrying. Notice that our text not only mentions the extra weight that is slowing us down, but also sin. We are to “throw off any extra baggage and get rid of the sin that trips us up,” or as our text puts it: “the sin that clings so closely.” Certainly, sin that clings to us is like having our legs in shackles or braces like Forrest Gump, which prevents us from running, and

even walking at times. Through repentance and confession, we can lay aside the grip of sin on our life, and by God's freely given grace, we are set free to run.

Charles Spurgeon, a great British preacher, tells the story of crossing a certain mountain range. The mule loaded with their luggage sank in the snow, was stuck and could not move until the load was removed. Then, and only then, could it scramble out of the hole it had made and continue on the journey. It's like sailors casting excess baggage into the sea to save a sinking ship. The point is that as Christians we need to be aware of the danger of being weighted down with earthly possessions, worries and the demands of daily life. With God's help, we can unload this excess baggage and enjoy this journey through life to our final destination in heaven, and no longer be mired up in the snow and mud created by this world.

Note that this extra baggage is mentioned separately from sin in this passage. These are some of the values and priorities that we adopt along our journey through life that may not be considered sin, but can still keep us from being our best and growing closer to the Lord. For example, these may include some unhealthy desires or addictions. Or it could be that bad habit that threatens to damage our physical or emotional health, relationships, or our good reputation. We may be struggling with the baggage of guilt over a past failure or the baggage of bitterness, anger, or ill feelings toward another person who has hurt us; or the regret over a foolish mistake or a broken relationship. What are the leg braces in your life that are preventing you from effectively running this race of faith, from growing spiritually? What's the barrier between you and God that you need to throw aside?

Two men were backpacking and camping in the wilderness of Alaska. Their packs were heavy because they contained everything they needed to survive. As they were walking down the trail, they suddenly heard the cry of a grizzly bear. Both men stopped dead in their tracks. One of the men slowly began to ease the heavy backpack off his shoulders. The other man looked at him somewhat bewildered and said: "Surely you don't think you can outrun that bear." "No," replied his companion, "I don't have to; I only have to outrun you." So, unload your baggage so you can outrun the devil.

The author of Hebrews is also telling us that we are in this race for the long run; we are not to be flash-in-the-pan or shooting-star Christians. The Christian life is a long-distance race rather than a short sprint. Some of the Hebrew Christians were tempted to drop out of the contest when the going got tough. Have you ever felt that way? But God wants us in it for the long haul. The race of faith is to be "run with perseverance." Now while some people get off to a dramatic beginning in their Christian experience, the important question is not how exciting your beginning was as a follower of Jesus Christ, but how faithful your journey through life is. It's not how you start that counts; it's how you finish! Remember, by perseverance the snails reached Noah's Ark.

As I mentioned earlier, I spent one summer at ROTC camp at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, where we had to run the mile several times in combat boots. Now I was not and am not a track athlete, but it was fun to observe the other soldiers and the different approaches that they took to running the mile. Some would lay back in the pack and hope to catch up at the end; this usually didn't work. Then there were the rabbits or those who thought they were the fastest thing on the face of the earth. At the start of the race, they would take off like their pants were on fire. But guess what – they would give out about three-quarters of the way. However, the smart runners would lay back near the front of the pack and stay close to the rabbits, and then at the three-quarters mark, they would start picking up the pace and finally turn it on on the last lap. Running the race of life faithfully requires perseverance, pacing yourself and using the mind that God has given you.

Another key in the race of life is obedience. Not only are we to persevere as Christians, but we are also called to run “the race that is set before us.” Our role is not to design the race course or to determine its length. Instead, we are to follow the path laid out for us by the Lord. Imagine what would happen if a runner deviated from the assigned race course; they would be immediately disqualified. Instead, we are to run a race course that we did not design, but that is set before us. Each of us knows from experience that our life has not always turned out as we dreamed or planned, but we must still keep going, walking in faith.

Now as we run this course of life, there will be times when we want to give up and quit. Let's face it; life can be hard at times, and as we all know, getting old is not for sissies! And based upon the past year, most of us can relate to this. There have been and are times when we feel devastated by circumstances and restrictions, temporarily overwhelmed by the obstacles of life. All of us have those days when nothing seems to go right and there's problems at every turn. But we must not be discouraged or give up. Remember, it's part of the course designed by God. As the writer here tells us, we are to persevere and keep going.

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, young Harold Abrahams, a champion sprinter, had just suffered his first ever defeat. After the race he sat alone, pouting in the bleachers. When his girlfriend tried to comfort him, he bellowed: “If I can't win, I won't run!” To which she replied: “If you don't run, you can't win.” Abrahams went on to win the gold medal in the hundred-meter race at the 1924 Olympics.

If you have ever run in a race, you know that there is a certain pattern. You don't speed up, then stop, go again or slow down. You keep going at a steady pace increasing your speed as you approach the finish line. Just like a car engine that is properly tuned runs its best and most efficient, we stay in tune in the race of life when we are in tune to the source of our strength and being, and that is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We do this by having a daily quiet time of prayer and Bible reading.

Finally, the only way to excel faithfully in the race of life is to keep your eyes on the goal. In a race, the runner often fails by taking his or her eyes off the finish line. Another mistake that runners make is to look back. The great baseball player Satchel Paige once said: "Don't look back, they might be gaining on you." In Philippians 3:13-14, the Apostle Paul tells us to forget what is behind and press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us. We fail when we do not fix our eyes on Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." That is really the key to running the long race of life in faith. We do not run for the applause of the crowd, but we live with the goal of following Jesus Christ.

Jesus shows us the way in this long race of faith. He persevered and "endured the cross" because He knew of the "joy that was set before Him," waiting for Him at the finish line. Rather than playing to the crowd who shamed Him on the cross, our Lord was obedient as He followed the race set out for Him by His Father. From His seat at the right hand of the throne of God, Jesus beckons us to follow and to run the same race, to run with perseverance.

In the coming days, weeks, and months, when life knocks you down, don't give up. Remember because of your personal belief in the Lord, you have something very special, something that the world and others at times try to ignore or not recognize, and that is the grace and love of God shown through His Son Jesus Christ. Philippians 4:13 reminds us that we can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us. So run in faith and with perseverance, for the Lord is running beside you. And I'll see you at the finish line as I and the great cloud of witnesses watch you receive your gold medal. Amen