

Hebrews 12:1
August 14, 2016

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: As you look over your life, what were some of the biggest or most important races or competitions you've ever run in or participated in your life? [Regionals: 800m, mile relay team; Capitol 10K, Playing B-Ball at UT]

Q: What made these races or sports important to you? What was at stake? Surely we didn't endure all the blood, sweat and tears for nothing!

Q: How did you train for them? How long did it take to prepare for these races or competitions?

Q: What happens when you stop training for a race? What observations have you noticed? [Our bodies deteriorate quickly when we stop. We become out of shape in no time at all! You can invest hours, weeks, and months steadily training, and in two weeks feel like you'd have to start all over! If you've ever trained and then caught a cold or a bug, you know the setbacks.]

The writer of Hebrews describes a life metaphor that maybe we don't think about as much. He suggests that life is like a race that has been set before us, which makes us racers. And we don't just show up for a race! It's something we are always training for. We especially need to read this with an eye toward how faith fits in all of this.

Transition: All of us CAN run the race marked out for us BY following the INSTRUCTIONS of the Hebrew writer. There are multiple instructions packed into the first verse of Chp 12. Let's see what they are and how we can encourage one another to follow them in our own race set before us.

[Read Heb 12:1]

V.1:

- Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Process Observations/Questions:

Q v.1: Who is the "great cloud of witnesses" being referenced here? [They are the heroes of the faith that were introduced to us in Chp 11. It is not suggested here that these men and women now in heaven are watching us as we run the race, like people seated in a stadium. The word "witnesses" does not mean "spectators." Our English word "martyr" comes directly from the Greek word translated "witness." These people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, they are bearing witness *to us* that God can see us through.]

Q v.1: What is the first instruction you see to run the race set before us? [Let's throw off everything that hinders us.]

Background: Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for the events. No athlete would actually participate wearing the weights because they would slow him down. (The modern analogy is a baseball player who swings a bat with a heavy metal collar on it before he steps to the plate.) Too much weight would tax one's endurance.

Q: What were things you had to rid yourself of in order to train effectively for your race or sport? What were the "no-no's?" [Dietary things? Social life?]

Q: To be an effective runner, we need to rid ourselves of everything that hinders us. So how does that look spiritually? What are things that can hinder our spiritual progress? [Distractions: noise of a TV in the background, iPhones "dinging" while we're reading Scripture, etc. They might even be "good things" in the eyes of others. A winning athlete does not choose between the good and the bad; he chooses between the better and the best. Whatever things hinder our progress to live by faith is what needs to go.]

Q: What is the second instruction you see to run the race set before us? [Let us throw off the sin that so easily entangles.]

Q: How does it look to "throw off sin that entangles us?" [First, while he does not name any specific sin, the writer was probably referring to the sin of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept Israel out of the Promised Land, and it is unbelief that hinders us from entering into our spiritual inheritance in Christ. The phrase "by faith" (or "through faith") is used twenty-one times in Hebrews 11, indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure. Second, if we have the ability to throw it off, it presupposes that we are acutely aware of sin in our life that needs to stop.]

Q: What is the third instruction you see to run the race set before us? ["Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."]

Q: What does "perseverance" mean? When you're training for a race, what did it look like? [Pushing through fatigue to reach your goals. It's the unwillingness to quit because you're so invested in the race.]

LOOK:

I have suggested that all of us can run the race that's been set before us by following the instructions of these writers. I trust that the Holy Spirit is tapping each of us by showing us where we can run our race more effectively and with less hindrances and entanglements.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 323). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

If the Apostle Paul were alive today, he would probably read the sports pages of the newspaper and follow the progress of various teams and athletes. Why? Because several athletic references in his letters indicate his interest in sports. Of course, both the Greeks and the Romans were keenly interested in athletic contests, not only for their physical well-being, but also for the honor of their towns and countries. It was a patriotic thing to be a good athlete and to bring glory to your country.

The writer of Hebrews combined these two themes of athletics and citizenship in this important twelfth chapter. The atmosphere is that of the footraces in the arena. We can see the runners laying aside their training weights and striving to run their races successfully. Some get weary and faint, while others endure to the end and win the prize. First the writer pictures the race (Heb. 12:1–13), and then emphasizes citizenship in the heavenly city (Heb. 12:14–29). In the minds of his readers, these two themes would go together; for no one could take part in the official games unless he was a citizen of the nation.

The one theme that runs through this chapter is *endurance* (Heb. 12:1 [“patience”], 2–3, 7; also see 10:32, 36 [“patience”]). The Jewish believers who received this letter were getting weary and wanted to give up; but the writer encouraged them to keep moving forward in their Christian lives, like runners on a track (see Phil. 3:12–14). He pointed out three divine resources that encourage a Christian to keep going when the situation is difficult.

The Example of the Son of God (Heb. 12:1)

When I was in junior high school, I had a coach who felt it his duty to make an athlete out of me. Everybody in my class could have told him he was wasting his time, because I was the worst athlete in the class—perhaps in the school! I entered a city-wide school competition, running the low hurdles. I knocked down six hurdles, fractured my left ankle, and immediately abandoned my sports career. (Shortly after, the coach enlisted in the army. I may have driven him to it.)

Coach Walker used several techniques to get me to do my best. “Other students have done it, and so can you!” was one of his encouragements. “Just think of what it will do for you physically!” was another. “Now, watch the other kids—see how they do it!” was a third. As I reflect on this experience, I am amazed to discover that these same three approaches are used in this paragraph, to encourage us in the Christian race.

Look around at the winners! (v. 1a) The “great ... cloud [assembly, mass] of witnesses” was introduced to us in Hebrews 11. They are the heroes of the faith. It is not suggested here that these men and women now in heaven are watching us as we run the race, like people seated in a stadium. The word “witnesses” does not mean “spectators.” Our English word “martyr” comes directly from the Greek word translated “witness.” These people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, they are bearing witness *to us* that God can see us through. God bore witness to them (Heb. 11:2, 4–5, 39) and they are bearing witness now to us.

“I rarely read the Old Testament, except for Psalms and Proverbs,” a believer once told me.

“Then you are missing a great deal of spiritual help,” I replied. I asked him to open to Romans 15:4 and read the verse aloud.

“For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

I then explained that “patience” means “endurance,” and that “comfort” means “encouragement.” One of the best ways to develop endurance and encouragement is to get to know the godly men and women of the Old Testament who ran the race and won. If you are having problems with your family, read about Joseph. If you think your job is too big for you, study the life of Moses. If you are tempted to retaliate, see how David handled this problem.

Look at yourself! (v. 1b) Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for the events. No athlete would actually participate wearing the weights because they would slow him down. (The modern analogy is a baseball player who swings a bat with a heavy metal collar on it before he steps to the plate.) Too much weight would tax one’s endurance.

What are the “weights” that we should remove so that we might win the race? Everything that hinders our progress. They might even be “good things” in the eyes of others. A winning athlete does not choose between the good and the bad; he chooses between the better and the best.

We should also get rid of “the sin that so easily entangles” (Heb. 12:1, NIV). While he does not name any specific sin, the writer was probably referring to the sin of unbelief. It was unbelief that kept Israel out of the Promised Land, and it is unbelief that hinders us from entering into our spiritual inheritance in Christ. The phrase “by faith” (or “through faith”) is used twenty-one times in Hebrews 11, indicating that it is faith in Christ that enables us to endure.

Pentecost, J. D. (1985). Daniel. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, p. 810). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The author concluded the basic argument of the epistle with a final admonition and warning. As usual his hortatory section grew directly out of the expository one which preceded it. His discussion of the life of faith now led to another call for perseverance.

1. THE INTRODUCTORY ADMONITION (12:1)

12:1. The life of faith has been amply attested by this **great cloud of Old Testament witnesses**. (This does not mean that they watch believers today.) Hence believers ought to **run with perseverance** (*hypomonēs*; cf. 10:32, 36; 12:2–3, 7) **the race marked out** in their Christian lives, setting aside whatever **hinders and the sin that so easily entangles** (*euperistaton*, “ambushes or encircles”).