

Hebrews Chapter 12A

Let me begin this morning by asking you a question: What image, what picture would you use to describe the Christian life, is there a metaphor or simile that adequately captures the essence of our new life in Christ.

The Bible actually employs a number of images to portray the Christian life but those images tend to be different from the pictures that are conjured up by men.

There are some who picture the Christian life as a set of precepts, a specific formula that leads to great success in if you just learn the right steps.

- 10 steps to a better life.
- 5 steps to a better marriage
- 12 steps that lead to holiness.

There are others who are more in tune with their own feelings who say that the Christian life is more like therapy. And Jesus is their newfound therapist. He helps them in their search for personal wholeness.

For others the image of the Christian life is sitting peacefully on the lap of their Father as he rocks back and forth telling nice stories.

Still others look at the Christian life as if it was a multi-level marketing scheme. They promote the image of winning, getting ahead, enriching yourself in this life. Inviting others to invest and join you in God's prosperity.

When you look at the New Testament much of the imagery that is used for the Christian life is actually not all that appealing.

- We see the image of sheep following a shepherd. (not sure how I feel about that) From what I have read sheep are just plain dumb. They are self-willed and smelly and they need lots and lots of attention.
- Another image given to us by the New Testament is that of students or disciples who are following their teacher.
- There is the image of a slave and his master.
- We find the image of soldiers who are engaged in a battle.

As we return to the book of Hebrews we are confronted with an image that I dare say most of us would be very uncomfortable with. Oh there may be a few people who would find it attractive (Tracy) but for most of us the image of running a Marathon immediately produces flashbacks to that dreaded high school gym class when you were forced to run a mile and all you remember is:

- Side stitch, leg cramps and the urgent cries for oxygen, classmates dropping

I think there is sufficient evidence that the Apostle Paul was a fan of athletics: He told the Corinthians: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 9: 24

- He wrote to the Galatians

Galatians 5: 7 **You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?**

- In my opinion the most inspirational image of running comes from the writer of Hebrews right here in Chapter 12.

This morning we are going to look at the picture the writer of Hebrews paints for us. And we will see how the Christian life can be compared to a Marathon.

1. The Event (We are going to look at the Marathon itself as an event)
2. The Encouragement (We will consider the record of those who have run the race before us)
3. The Encumbrances (We will observe the obstacles that we face as we run the race)
4. The Example (And we will look to Jesus as the ultimate example of a marathon runner)

1 The Event:

Back in Chapter 11 we carefully considered a long list of Biblical Heroes who ran the Race of Faith before us: (Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses.....)

Here in Chapter 12 the Author uses the testimony of those great men and women to encourage US (you and me) to run the race that God has set before us.

- The back ground of this image is the ancient Olympic Games:
- From the 8th century BC to the 4th Century AD the Ancient Olympic Games were held every four years in Olympia Greece
- Every 2 years the Isthmian Games held near the city of Corinth: The athletes would compete in footraces, wrestling, boxing, throwing the discus and javelin, the long jump, chariot racing, poetry reading and singing (Singing a sport)
- The greatest event was the foot race.

It is this foot race that is used here in the Bible as a metaphor for The Life of Faith.

- The starting line for this race was that place in life when God sovereignly and graciously made us alive in Christ. (New Birth)
- The finish line is that time when this mortality puts on immortality, that time when we break the ribbon of death and enter into in the presence of God.
 - Remember Paul’s Words as his life is drawing to a close.

2 Timothy 4:7 **I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.**
8 **Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the**

righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

- Paul looked forward to that Laurel Wreath that was placed on the head of the victor in the ancient games.
- There were no gold, silver and bronze medals awarded in those games. The one who was victorious the race had a crown placed on his head.

Here in Hebrews 12 we are looking at the main event. This is the Marathon of Faith, running every day through the hills and valleys of the course that God set before us.

- IN this race we are not competing against one another, instead we are all running together toward a common goal. (Voice of Jesus saying “Well Done!”)
- Let’s look at the Text

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

- The key phrase denoting the event is this: **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**

The word translated “**RACE**” is the Greek word AGON from which we get our word “Agony”.

- Running a marathon is no walk in the park. It is physically demanding and mentally grueling. It requires the utmost determination and perseverance if you are going to finish the course.

And the manner in which we are to run this race is “**with endurance.**”

- The word speaks of Hopeful Patience, a steady determination to keep on going and not give up even in the face of misery or adversity. (NO Pain, No Gain)

Many others have run this race before us (**Abel, Enoch, Abraham and the whole list from Chapter 11**) but now it’s our turn, it’s our time to pick up where they left off and run the race that God has set before us. Those who have run encourage US!

2 The encouragement to run

Our encouragement to run comes from the great cloud of witnesses who have run the race before us. Allow me to give you a personal example:

- In 2002 I had the incredible honor of running in the Olympic Torch Relay through the city of Philadelphia.

As the Olympic Flame was making its way through Southeastern Pennsylvania everyone who was scheduled to run with the torch, including myself were riding together on a limo bus that was transporting us to our specific locations.

- At the front of the bus was a representative from the U.S. Olympic Committee. And during the ride he showed us a video of all of the inspirational people who have run with the torch in the past.
 - Presidents and Prime Ministers of nations, Nelson Mandela, Great athletes like Cal Ripken Jr and Mohamed Ali actually carried the torch in 2002.
- I can't begin to describe the flood of emotion that filled my heart and mind as I watched and listened to the testimony of those who had run the race before me.
- So the moment when the Olympic flame was handed off to me the adrenalin that flooded my body enabled me to run like I had never run before. I don't even remember my feet hitting the ground. And the sound of the crowd kept the adrenalin flowing through the end of the course.

When it comes to the flame of our faith Hebrews chapter 11 provides us with the inspirational examples of those who have run the race before us, finishing the course, leaving us with amazing examples of faith and perseverance to follow.

Remember from Ch 11 - By faith these men and women *conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*

- And NOW, through the Word of God, these heroes of faith surround US and serve as a great cloud of witnesses.

The image that the writer is painting here is NOT the picture of these great men and women of faith filling the stands of heaven in order to watch US, as we perform.

- They serve as examples to us not spectators of us. Their witness, their testimony is always in front of us, urging us, encouraging us to keep on running, finish the course.

If I could interject for those of you who have younger children at home it is a good thing to add a few good Christian biographies to your family devotions so that your children will be encouraged by the faith of others who have run the race before us.

- Adoniram Judson, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jim Elliott.

Throughout the book of Hebrews the author uses the words “**We Have**” to communicate some of the greatest possessions belonging to us as believers.

- WE have a great High Priest, We have Confidence, We have a great cloud of witnesses. AND immediately after he speaks of our possession he issues a challenge:
- In Ch. 4 WE HAVE a Great High Priest who has been tempted like we are. (In light of that great blessing)
 - We are encouraged to come boldly to the throne of grace.
- In Ch. 10 WE HAVE confidence to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.

- And (IN light of that) We are encouraged to draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith.
- Here in Ch. 12, WE HAVE a great cloud of Witnesses surrounding us.
 - In light of those great witnesses we are encouraged to RUN.
 - We are not called to stroll, to meander, to wonder or explore.
 - We are called to run the race with endurance like those who have gone before us.

The privileges that we possess in Christ should motivate us to an appropriate action. Because we run the same course and share in the same gift of faith as those who have gone before we should learn the manner in which they ran. How did they run?

3 Encumbrances that Hinder us

Hebrews 12:1 **Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,**

- In the ancient games when the runners entered the arena, they put off their bulky, long flowing robes and everything else that would impede their ability to run. They actually ran in the buff.
- They didn't run in the robe because it would get tangled around their legs and trip them up. Clothing only created more wind resistance so it had to go.
- So they PUT OFF, lay aside, strip away everything that hindered them.
- That same word that is used here in Hebrews 12 was also used in Ephesians 4:

Ephesians 4: 22 **put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,**

Colossians 3: 8 **But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.**

- Every serious athlete knows that he must live a disciplined life if he is to succeed.
 - He eats special diet to put off excess weight, he removes activities from his life that get in the way of his training.
- Every Disciple of Christ who runs the race of faith is disciplined by the Spirit to put off those things that hinder him from effectively running the race.

Here in Hebrews there are actually TWO things that are being stripped away:

- First we are encouraged to lay aside every weight, every hindrance.
- Second we are told to lay aside the **“sin which clings so closely**

What does he mean by every weight or hindrance?

- There are things in all of our lives, whether they are attitudes or habits that may not be considered sin, but they are things that impede our spiritual growth. Like running with ankle weights, cycling against a strong head wind.

- One of the reasons why we get discouraged in running the race and lose heart, why we grow weary is because we are impeded by the excess weights and the baggage that weigh us down.
- Many of the hobbies that we enjoy, many of the pleasures of this life are not sinful but when they begin to consume all of our time and attention we become spiritually lethargic burdened and agitated.

1 Corinthians 6: 12 "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything.

- ARE THERE THINGS in your life that are stepping on your spiritual air hose? Restricting or cutting off your devotional life?
- We can't spend our lives in front of the screens that have become such a huge part of daily life. TV Screen, Computer Screen, Ipad, Kindle Fire, Phone.
- I need some face time with the Lord. I need to contemplate His Word in order to stay on course.

The second encumbrance is "Sin which clings so closely."

- Easily entangling sin, or as King James called it every besetting sin pictures those pesky sins that seem to stick to us as we seek to run the race.

Think of it like those annoying seed pods (Burr) that stick to your clothing when you take the dog for a walk in the field. You go for a 15-minute walk and then you spend the next hour pulling 75 Burrs off of both you and the dog.

Take note that the Author doesn't label or provide a listing of those sins because we would quickly make some sort of perverted law out of it, or find a way to justify ourselves because our particular sin didn't make the list.

- And because the Holy Spirit dwells in each one of us, WE KNOW, we are very aware of those sins that continually cling to us.
 - You have yours and I have mine and we will spend much of our lives setting them aside, confessing them to God, receiving grace for forgiveness through the cross.

Listen: I want you to know that even if you have to set that sin aside multiple times in the course of a single week don't let that stop you from running the race!

- Don't give up! Be like Forest Gump... He was running!

To this point the Author has drawn our attention to the heroes of faith that have gone before us but now he calls us to fix our gaze on the Lord Jesus He is the ultimate example for us to follow,

4. The Example to Follow

In running like most sports where you look is extremely important. Looking down at your feet or turning your head to see who is behind you will slow you down and cause you to veer off-course.

- Riding my bicycle in the MS 150 one year I was in a line of cyclists heading into Ocean City N.J. when I looked back to see where Jeremy was and I ended up in the grass on the side of the road.
- Well the Writer of Hebrews provides specific instruction as to where we are to focus our attention as we run the race of faith:

Hebrews 12:2 **looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**

- Literally the wording calls us to “**look away to Jesus.**” Turning our eyes away from everything else (even those Heroes) and fixing our gaze solely on Jesus.
- Of all the great Heroes of Faith there is none Greater than Jesus!
- Every one of the men and women listed for us in Ch 11 exemplified Faith imperfectly. Their examples were all flawed to one degree or another by sin.
- BUT not Jesus! He is the perfect example of faith. No one endured more hardship, NO one bore more suffering, NO one trusted the Father like Jesus.

He is called the founder and perfecter of faith.

- As the founder, (ARCHEGOS) he is the pioneer, the originator, the one who begins and takes the lead.
- He is the preeminent example of faith. He left his eternal home in glory where he dwelt at the right hand of the Father and he put on human flesh.
- When he walked among us He was tempted in every way like we are and yet he was without sin. He trusted in the Word of God as the sword of the spirit when he faced the tempter’s snare.

Speaking of his arrest, his trial and subsequent crucifixion Peter writes:

1 Peter 2:23 **When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.**

- He KEPT ON entrusting himself to him who judges righteously. (expression of faith)
- By faith he yielded himself to the sovereign will of the Father, laying his life down as the one and only sacrifice for those who would be saved.

I would remind you that this book of Hebrews was written to a group of people who were enduring difficulty, facing hardship and persecution for the faith.

- The Lord Jesus warned his Disciples about the difficult days they would face.

Matthew 10: 21 **Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, 22 and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.**

- There are many obstacles facing those who run the Marathon of faith.
 - Hardship, persecution, sickness
- With this in mind endurance is an absolute necessity for every one who runs the race.

The Good News is this, Jesus is not only the Founder, the Author of faith, He is also the Perfecter, the Finisher, the one who brings faith to full and complete maturity.

- I will have much more to say about this next week for today let me simply say this:

Philippians 1:6 **And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.**

- The work of Grace accomplished by the Lord Jesus on the cross is sufficient to bring all who believe safely to the finish line.
- You see, Jesus did not PIONEER a faith that fizzles,
- He faithfully brings to completion this glorious salvation that is revealed in the Scripture alone that is by Grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone.