

World of the Bible Series: Ancient Rome, Running the Race, & Looking Unto Jesus Today

Hebrews 12:1-2

One of the most beautiful descriptions of the Christian Life comes from Hebrews 12:1-2. God inspired the writer of Hebrews to compare all of our time living on earth, to being a part of a huge race.

The lessons that we can glean from these two verses are so helpful. From the world of ancient Rome, we can see the picture of running the race. From the truths of Hebrews 12, we can see how to run that race looking unto Jesus.

First we need to read the passage and then follow the simple steps of summarizing the truths, pointing out key lessons, and then allowing God to apply these to our lives.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (NKJV) Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race (agon) that is set before us, ² looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Life is an Agonizing Race

The race of Hebrews 12 is a graphic and visual scene that comes right out of the Roman World of the New Testament.

First, in the Race there are Witnesses. "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses".

The witnesses in the 1st Century were the spectators that filled the stands, watched, and cheered; but were in no way a part of the race. But, in Hebrews 12, the witnesses are previous runners, saints that have already been in the arena, have finished the race and are now testifying that the Lord enabled them to finish the race, so we can also.

What we need to run the race and finish well we can learn from Hebrews 11. Here are just a few of the lessons that those who have already run ahead of us, are sharing with us. Remember that God chose the details of Hebrews 11, to encourage us as we run the

race He has given us.

- **The Race is about GIVING to God like Abel** (Hebrews 11:4). Abel gave God what God asked for and it cost him his life. But it purchased an everlasting reward that God still speaks about.
- **The Race is about WALKING with God like Enoch** (Hebrews 11:5-6). Enoch sought God in a world where few others were, and God still speaks about it.
- **The Race is about OBEYING to God like Noah** (Hebrews 11:7). Noah obeyed God in a world where few others were, and God still speaks about it.
- **The Race is about TRUSTING to God like Abraham** (Hebrews 11:8-19). Abraham obeyed God in a world where few others were, and God still speaks about it. One of the ways that God encourages us is by showing what some of the obstacles we can expect in the race, and how others have found His grace to overcome them. There are four that Abraham's race reminds us of:
 1. Abraham faced the obstacle or test of the Unknown in v. 8.
 2. Abraham faced the obstacle or test of Delay in v. 9.
 3. Abraham faced the obstacle or test of the Unseen in v. 10.
 4. Abraham faced the obstacle or test of Human Impossibility in v. 11.

The Race Demands Sacrifices

Next, in the Race there are Sacrifices. "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*".

The race merits extra-ordinary preparation such as stripping off anything that weights down or holds back. Jesus is the Author & Finisher" of this race, so He has something to say about this element of sacrifice. Turn back with me to Matthew 5:27-30. Jesus advocates radical choice to be sure nothing keeps us from finishing the race.

Thirdly, life is like a race. "and let us run with endurance the race"

The word translated "run" is the Greek word **trecho** and this word is used 3x in I Cor. 9:24, and 1x in v. 26.

1 Corinthians 9:24-26 (NKJV) you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*.²⁵ And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*.²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air.

The word translated "race" is even more amazing. That word is also found in I Timothy

6:12, and II Timothy 4:7, and is Paul's way of describing life as an endless athletic contest. We would pronounce this Greek word in English as agony and agonize. That is what the athletic contests were like: agonizing.

And that is how Paul describes our Christian life.

1 Timothy 6:12 (NKJV) Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

2 Timothy 4:7 (NKJV) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

The Race Demands Endurance

Next, the race demands endurance. "and let us **run with endurance** the race"

This word is the word for patience in so many places in the NT, but here are three key passages:

Patience is dispensed by the Spirit of God, and enlarged by His grace.

Romans 5:3-4 (NKJV) And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Patience is encouraged by the Scriptures. Romans 15:4-5 (NKJV) For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. ⁵ Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus.

The Race Has a Finish Line

Our focal point is Christ, who begins (Author) and ends (finisher) our spiritual life. "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith"

Jesus is the One who called us, launching us into the race. He goes beside us the whole way; and He is at the finish line. Jesus shows us that He is cheering us each step of the process. Remember His words when Jesus sent off the first group of NT racers into the marathon?

Matthew 28:18-20 (NKJV) And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make

disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; **and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.**" Amen

Jesus models the way we should run. "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame"

Jesus knows how hard the course will be, He has already experienced every part. He shows us that the way to overcome present distress is with hope for the future joy. Jesus learned in the days of His flesh, and we learn from Him.

Hebrews 5:7-9 (NKJV) who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear,⁸ though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.⁹ And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him

Jesus awaits us at the finish line. "and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Paul most clearly describes this motivation for the race. Listen to his voice rising from the dim depths of the dungeon called Mamertine, where he awaited execution.

No matter what we face, the joy of seeing Jesus, face-to-face can brighten any prison we may ever face.

*2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NKJV) For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.⁸ Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, **which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day,** and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing*

The Finish Line Has a Crown

Jesus wants to hand us a reward at the end of our race. He has promised to us the follow crowns that reflect His sanctifying work in our lives.

Rewards in Heaven are not about what I accomplished, but rather what I allow Christ to do in and through me for His Glory.

Here is how those rewards are described:

The Faithful Athlete that resists all disqualifiers is promised the Unfading Crown. This reward is only for those who glorified God by choosing to discipline their body, and keep their flesh crucified with Christ, and their lives under the control of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 9:25-27 (NKJV) And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown*.²⁶ Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air.²⁷ But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

The Faithful Worker who faithfully wins souls is promised the Crown of Honor. This reward is only for those who glorified God by choosing to Disciple & Evangelize.

1 Thessalonians 2:19 (NKJV) For what *is* our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? *Is it* not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?

Philippians 4:1 (NKJV) Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved

The Faithful Soldier who faithfully watches for Christ, and stays unentangled with the world: is promised the Crown of Righteousness. This reward is only for those who glorified God by choosing to live daily for Christ in light of His return: One who looks and lives like they expect Jesus at any time.

2 Timothy 2:4-5 (NKJV) No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of *this* life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.⁵ And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

2 Timothy 4:8 (NKJV) Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

The Faithful Discipled who faithfully shepherds is promised the Crown of Glory. This reward is only for those who glorified God by choosing to exemplify Christ-like living for Christ's Flock.

1 Peter 5:3-4 (NKJV) nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;⁴ and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

The Faithful Witness who is loyal unto death: is promised the Crown of Life. This reward is only for those who glorified God by choosing to willingly suffer for Christ to the death whether life-long or momentarily.

Revelation 2:10 (NKJV) Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may

be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life

James 1:12 (NKJV) Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him

What does God want us to think about each day we agonize through life (to use Paul's expression and perspective)? Here is a summary:

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In the Race there are Witnesses.

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- **The Race is about WALKING with God like Enoch**
- ***The Race is about OBEYING to God like Noah***
- ***The Race is about TRUSTING to God like Abraham***

Abraham faced the obstacle or test of the Unknown in v. 8.

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The Race Demands Sacrifices & *Life is like a race.*

The Race Demands Endurance

- **Patience is dispenses by the Spirit of God, and enlarged by His grace..**
- **Patience is encouraged by the Scriptures.**

The Race Has a Finish Line

- **Our focal point is Christ, who begins (Author) and ends (finisher) our spiritual life.**
- **Jesus models the way we should run.**
- **Jesus awaits us at the finish line, and wants to present us with a crown!**