

“HOW TO RUN THE RACE WITH ENDURANCE”

I. Introduction

- A. We are in the midst of the final section of Hebrews, where the writer is calling his readers to persevere in the faith.
 - 1. The word “Therefore” at the beginning of tonight’s passage tells us that this is one of the many points in the letter where there is a transition from exposition to exhortation.
 - 2. After the exposition on the faith of Old Testament saints in chapter 11, the writer now exhorts us to have the same faith ourselves.
 - 3. He does this by comparing the life of faith to a long race, a race that has to be run with endurance.
- B. As we study this passage tonight, we will focus upon three things that it teaches us about how to run the race of faith with endurance.
 - 1. First, we need to look to Jesus.
 - 2. Second, we need to be trained by God’s discipline.
 - 3. And third, we need to strive for holiness.

II. Look to Jesus (1-3)

- A. The passage begins by referring to the Old Testament believers who were discussed in chapter 11 as a “cloud of witnesses.”
 - 1. There are two senses in which the term ‘witnesses’ can be understood here.
 - 2. We could take it to mean that these believers are like a crowd of heavenly spectators cheering us on as we run the same race that they have already completed.

3. Or we could take it to mean that the persevering faith of these saints bore witness to God's faithfulness.
 4. It is possible that the writer had both of these ideas in mind, but the one thing that comes through loud and clear is that we need to follow the example of these witnesses as we run our own race of faith.
- B. Next, the writer issues two commands.
1. The first command is, "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely."
 2. This reminds us that many things can become obstacles to our call to follow Christ.
 3. There are things in this world that you will need to set aside if you are going to live a faithful Christian life.
 4. Some of these things may not even be inherently sinful, but if they become a hindrance rather than a help in running the race of faith, then they need to be set aside.
 5. If we fail to set them aside, they will weigh us down and make our race much more difficult than it would otherwise be.
- C. Another thing that we need to set aside is sin.
1. In saying this, the writer is not suggesting that it is possible to live a sinless Christian life.
 2. What he means is that we should not tolerate or cherish any kind of sin in our lives.
 3. Sin should not find any refuge in a Christian's life.
 4. Whenever sin rears its head, and it is always rearing its head, it should be met with fierce opposition.

5. As long as you live in this present life, you will find sin right there alongside you.
 6. But this does not mean that you should ever make peace with sin.
 7. In the words of J. Gresham Machen, “although sin is actually found in Christians, it does not belong there; it is never to be acquiesced in for one single moment, but is to be treated as a terrible anomaly that simply ought not to be.” [*What Is Faith?*, 207]
 8. The Christian life involves the continual setting aside of sin.
 9. If you don’t deal with sin in this way, it will entangle your feet and trip you up.
 10. Falling down is the one thing you don’t want to do when you are running a race.
- D. The second command in verse 1 is more positive: “let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”
1. By using the image of running a race as an analogy for the life of faith, the writer reminds us that we have to be active and deliberate in living out the Christian life.
 2. Being a Christian is not simply a matter of professing faith in Christ and then moving on with the rest of your life.
 3. It is a matter of exercising and acting upon your faith by obeying God’s commands in the various situations that arise in your life.
 4. Your life is the race-course that the Lord has set before you, and he calls you to run the entire race — not just certain parts — in faith.
 5. Notice also that this race is not a sprint but a long-distance run.
 6. There are no short-cuts in this race.

7. It has to be run from beginning to end, and for this we need endurance.
- E. Where can we obtain the endurance we need, especially when we grow weary or get discouraged?
1. We don't find it by looking deeper inside ourselves.
 2. This is one point where the beloved film "Chariots of Fire" gets it wrong.
 3. There is a scene in that movie in which Eric Liddell is giving a speech to a crowd after one of his races.
 4. He tells his listeners that he wants to compare the life of faith to running a race, and then he says this: "And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within."
 5. I'm not sure if that statement is truly reflective of what Eric Liddell believed, but if it was he was wrong.
 6. The power to see the race to its end comes from keeping our eyes fixed upon Jesus, because he is the founder and the perfecter of our faith.
 7. Jesus is not only the object of our faith.
 8. He is also the source of our faith and the One who brings our faith to its intended goal.
- F. As we look to Jesus, we should remember all that he endured in order to secure our salvation and bring us into his glorious kingdom.
1. The thing that enabled him to persevere through such great suffering was that he always kept the goal in his sights.
 2. He endured the cross because he was thinking of the joy that was set before him.

3. Thinking about the hostility that Jesus faced when he came into this world can help us to keep a proper perspective on the hostility that the church continues to face as it carries out its mission.
4. Sometimes the hostility is violent, as we can clearly see in some parts of the world today.
5. And while this is not the case in our culture, there is no doubt that Christianity is becoming increasingly marginalized here.
6. We hear about instances in which people who seriously believe the Bible and are committed to following its teachings are treated as if they were the moral equivalent of a hate group.
7. We should not be surprised by this, we certainly should not respond to it by compromising with the world.
8. We need to keep running our race in faith, regardless of how the world around us treats us.

III. Be Trained by God's Discipline (4-11)

- A. This brings us to the second thing that this passage teaches us about running our race with endurance: we need to be trained by God's discipline.
 1. The writer begins this section by saying, "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."
 2. This reminds us that the Christian life is both a race and a battle.
 3. As a Christian, you are enlisted in a lifelong fight against sin, both your own sin and the sin of the people around you.
 4. Sin is your true enemy, and you need to keep on resisting it all the way up to the day you die.

- B. Having made this point, our text goes on to show that God uses our troubles for our ultimate good.
1. While we have a tendency to see such things as evidence that God has forsaken us, this passage turns that thinking on its head.
 2. Citing a passage from Proverbs, the writer explains that the challenges that confront us in life are evidence that God really is our Father.
 3. Just as a good human father disciplines his children for their good, so also does our heavenly Father discipline us.
 4. God providentially brings challenges and disappointments and irritations and hardships into our lives in order to test us and cause us to grow in grace.
 5. Our trials pinpoint our weaknesses.
 6. They humble us and continually drive us back to Christ.
 7. If God did not discipline us in this way, we would grow too attached to this world.
 8. As Carl Trueman points out in his new book on Martin Luther, Luther thought that “misguided love for or reliance upon the material world leaves humanity in an unstable and indeed immoral state subject to disturbance and chaos at the merest sign that the world is a fickle and uncertain place.” [Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life*, 124]
 9. This is why Luther said that even life’s minor irritations are used by God to get our attention: “The good God permits such small evils to befall us merely in order to arouse us snorers from our deep sleep and to make us recognize, on the other hand, the incomparable benefits we still have. He wants us to consider what would happen if He were to withdraw His goodness from us completely.” [124]

- C. No child likes to be disciplined, but we all know that when parents fail to discipline a child the long-term effects are terrible for that child.
 - 1. As the writer explains, God disciplines us for our good.
 - 2. He uses our trials to sanctify us.
 - 3. There may even be times when you can look back and see how God did this through a particular trial that you faced.
 - 4. And when as Christians we look back upon our entire lifetime from the vantage point of eternity, we will all be able to join the psalmist in saying, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." (Ps. 119:71)
 - 5. The more we keep this in mind, the more successful we will be at guarding our hearts against resentment and grumbling in the face of life's trials.
 - 6. We will be able to pray with David, "I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me." (Ps. 131:1b-2)

IV. Strive for Holiness (12-17)

- A. We turn now to the third and final part of our text, where the focus is upon our need to strive for holiness as we run the race of faith.
 - 1. Here the writer tells us to lift our drooping hands, to strengthen our weak knees, to make straight paths for our feet.
 - 2. In other words, he is telling us to brace themselves for what lies ahead of us.
 - 3. The Bible is honest about the challenges that you will face in your Christian life.

4. It does not promise you your best life now.
 5. On the contrary, as Paul and Barnabas told the new Christians to whom they ministered during their first missionary journey, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)
 6. We need to prepare ourselves for the tribulations that lie ahead of us.
 7. There may very well be days when we will feel overwhelmed by despair, or pain, or loss, or uncertainty, or something else.
 8. The way to make straight paths for your feet is not to pretend that such times will never come but to allow the Bible to shape the way you think about the purpose of suffering in the Christian life.
- B. Next, the writer says that we are to “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”
1. We need to pursue two things: peace with others and holiness in our own lives.
 2. When it says that no one will see the Lord without holiness, it does not mean that our personal holiness is the means by which we gain acceptance with God.
 3. Such a notion would stand in direct contradiction to the Bible’s doctrine of justification by faith alone.
 4. Instead, this means that everyone who has truly been justified will also be sanctified.
 5. The holiness that is cultivated in the lives of the saints is the evidence of our justification, since justifying faith is a faith that brings forth the fruit of good works.

- C. Holiness is necessary, but it is crucial that we remember where holiness comes from.
 - 1. It does not come from within.
 - 2. Christ is the source of our sanctification every bit as much as he is the source of our justification.
 - 3. As the writer said back in chapter 10, “by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (v. 14)
- D. Another thing that we should note about this call to pursue holiness is that it is not merely an individual pursuit.
 - 1. The writer’s words in verse 15 make it clear that Christians have a responsibility to watch out for each other.
 - 2. While the church’s elders have this responsibility in their official capacity as overseers, this is also something that all of the saints participate in as members of Christ’s body.
 - 3. We need to keep watch over our brothers and sisters lest in the end some of them fail to obtain the grace of God.
 - 4. We need to encourage one another and spur one another on as we run the race of faith.
 - 5. If we see a fellow believer falling back or stopping altogether, we need to help him get back on track.
 - 6. When a root of bitterness is allowed to remain in a professing Christian’s life, it can have a poisonous effect upon not only in the life of that individual but in the entire body.
 - 7. This is why church discipline is necessary.
 - 8. We need to remind one another that failure to run the race to the end has dire consequences.

9. It disqualifies a person from receiving God's grace.
- E. This is the point that the writer is making when he refers to Esau.
1. Esau put personal gratification ahead of the covenant blessing.
 2. He was unholy in the sense that he had no regard for spiritual things.
 3. When a professing Christian allows the worries and pleasures of this life to distract him from Christ, he is in danger of choking out the seed of God's Word and causing it to be unfruitful in his life.
 4. That is a very serious matter, because if a person does not have the fruit of holiness, he will not see the Lord.

V. Conclusion

- A. As you think about what may lie ahead of you in this life, there are all sorts of uncertainties.
- B. But as a Christian, you can know that one thing is absolutely certain: for as long as you continue to have breath in your lungs, you have not yet completed the race that your God has set before you.
- C. Make sure that you run the race of faith all the way to the end.
- D. Run with your eyes fixed on Jesus; run with an attitude that humbly accepts the Lord's discipline; and run in pursuit of holiness.
- E. This is how the race of faith is to be run, if the crown is to be won.

*A cloud of witnesses around
Hold you in full survey:
Forget the steps already trod,
And onward urge your way,
And onward urge your way.*