

The Race of Faith
Hebrews 12:1-3
Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Bethany Baptist Church
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...pray...

1. Let's step into a new section of Hebrews. **Follow as I read 12:1-3.**
2. The writer of Hebrews has just ushered us out through the exit of *The Faith Hall of Fame* (ch.11).
 - a. But right outside the *Halls'* exit is another *stop*. Except it's not a *stop*, it's a *start*.
 - b. We are now standing at the *starting line* of a *race* – the *race of the Christian life*, the *race of faith*.
 - c. Maybe we should call it: *The Celestial City Marathon!*
3. Every Christian is *summoned* to the starting line. The **race** is *long*. The **course** is sometimes *demanding*. But the **finish line** is drawn in the *courts of heaven!*
4. The *strength* you need to *win* is found in *faith*. Faith fueled by *examples* of faith.

Five coaching points for winning the race of faith.

Step up (v.1).

Put off (v.1).

Run hard (v.1).

Look to (v.2).

Finish strong (v.3).

Step up (v.1).

5. The most important *words* in these beloved *verses* are simply these: “*let us run with endurance.*” Christian, you are in a *race*.
 - a. This is not a *stroll* or a *fun run*. It’s not even a *short, intense, sprint*.
 - b. When you *turned* to Jesus and *trusted* Him to save you, you agreed to run a *marathon of faith*.
 - c. In fact, the Gr. word translated “*race*” is **αργων** (2X), which relates to the idea of *agony*. Your race is a *long, demanding endurance run*.

6. But despite the fact our race is *long*, & sometimes *hard*, make no mistake – it is *exactly* the race God has charted for you.
 - a. V.1(b) – assures us the race is “*set before us.*” God is the *clerk of the course*, the *race judge*, the *starter*, and the *referee* all in one!
 - b. Every *hurdle*, every *hill*, every *water pit*, every *long stretch* is right where it is because God *set* it there.
 - c. As you picture God *preparing* your *race* for you, including all the *obstacles*, remember this promise (Rm 8:28): *God causes all things to work together for good, for those who love Him, for those who are called according to His purpose.*
 - i. God has *set* your course; our Father has *measured* your race w/ *holy purpose*!

7. Despite the idea of “*agony*” hinted at here, some people actually *like* to run....! But most generally *avoid it!* Which means you have some strong ***motivation*** to *step up* to the *starting line*.
- a. Our text (1-3) offers **two** *motivators* to *run by faith*, and we’ve already looked very carefully at the *first* (we’ll consider the *second* in a few minutes). The *first motivation* is all those *heroes* in the *Hall of Fame!*
 - b. The *heroes of old* are the *reference* (1) of “***Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses ...***”
 - i. Ch. 11 featured **28** *specific* saints, and an entire *dream team* of *prophets!* There wasn’t time enough to even *name them all!*
 - ii. They *followed the Messiah*, the *better Mediator* of the *better promise, ... by faith.*
 - iii. Now they are called on as *witnesses*.
 - c. It is popular & tempting to think the picture in v.1 is of an ***audience*** of *spectators*, watching you & cheering for *your race* after they’ve run *theirs*.
 - i. But, the Gr. word translated *witnesses*” here came to have **3** possible meanings: *spectator*, ***testifier***, eventually *martyr*.
 - ii. The best idea here (1) is *witness... testifier*. The *saints of old* are **not** sitting there *eating ball park franks* and *critiquing your race*, they are *talking to you* about the power of *faith!*
 - iii. Christian, as you *step up to the line*, you are *surrounded* by an *uncountable cloud* of men & women of old (like the dozens of ch.11) who now *urge you on*, as they *give personal testimony* to the power of *living (running)* “***by faith.***”
 - iv. *By faith*, they overcame *armies & lions & furnaces & swords & mockings & scourgings & imprisonments & sometimes death.*
 - v. Their *testimony* for you is: *by faith, we* cleared those *hurdles, by faith, so can you!* ... ***It is your time to step up to the line!***

Put off (v.1).

1. The *runner* has a *pre-race ritual*. He *warms up*: walking, jogging, stretching. Showing off his fancy *warm-up gear* & high-dollar *running shoes*.
 - a. But minutes before the race he has **second** ritual. He *puts off*...
 - b. The runner *put off* and *lay aside* those fancy *sweats*. No matter what the *temperature*, he wears as *little* as possible (the ancient Greek athletes wore even *less* than that..!) That stuff is *extra baggage*.
 - c. He *lays aside* his *training shoes* & *laces* on his *feather light racers*.
 - d. He *lays aside* all the *binding clothes* & *extra weight*, no matter how *flashy* or *warm* it is!
2. Our text (1) calls us to prepare to *step up* and *run* by *laying aside* our ***encumbrances*** and our ***sin***.
 - a. *Let us also lay aside every encumbrance*.
 - i. The picture is of *extra weight*. Extra weight *slows you down*.
 - ii. The *encumbrance* might not explicitly be *sin*, at least not for *everyone*, but **you** know it's *distracting you* in **your** Christian walk! Perhaps it's a *habit*, a *relationship*, a *hobby*.
 - iii. Beloved, if your *interest* has become a *spiritual encumbrance*, it's time to *lay it aside* and *step up to the starting line*!

- b. *Let us also lay aside the **sin** which so easily entangles us.*
- i. The reality is that *living the Christian life* while embracing sin is like trying to *run the Boston marathon* with *leg-shackles!*
 - ii. Every commentary points out that v.1 reads: “**the sin** which so easily entangles us...**the sin.**” As in, the *specific sin*.
 1. *Any/all sin* slows you down, but some of you have *habitual sins* (“*besetting sins*”).
 2. You *must* determine to break your habitual sin, the *evil* that *trips you up* , time and again (**e.g.**):
 - a. **Wrong relationships.** *Bad company corrupts good morals* (1 Cor 15:33). *Purge your Friends List!*
 - b. **Impure thoughts & actions.** *Beloved, pornography is addictive! ... The immoral woman(man) lures you off the narrow way* (Proverbs)
 - c. **Intractable pride** (= “**I am the gold standard of excellence**”). *Pride goes before a fall. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the ...*
 - d. **Untamed tongue.** *Our words make us stumble* (Jas 3). *Don’t trip over your tongue!*
3. Now before we *run on*, let’s recognize where our *marathon illustration* might need some further *explanation*. The athlete (1) generally *lays aside every encumbrance and sin* **before** he starts the race.
- a. You & I need to do the *same*, but we *also* need to be *laying aside* the sin we encounter *every lap of life’s race*. *All the time!*
 - b. **Martin Luther** taught that the entire Christian life is one of *repentance*.
 - c. You & I will be *tempted* every step of the way! You have to **keep putting off your sin**. ... **Put off your sin and run!**

Run hard (v.1).

1. The Bible loves these *sports metaphors*! Athletics were a big part of *Greco-Roman* culture, and Paul alone used at least a *dozen* sporting illustrations. Consider **1 Cor 9:24-27**: *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you **may win**. Everyone who competes in the games exercises **self-control** in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as **not without aim**; I box in such a way, as **not beating the air**; but I **discipline my body** and **make it my slave**, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will **not be disqualified**.*
 - a. The apostle's point is that the Christian race requires *discipline* because it can be *difficult*. (Comment on **bolded** words.)
 - b. Do you remember the underlying tone of the word for "race" in Hebrews 12:1...? **ἀγῶν** ... a *race* with a hint of *agony*.

2. Beloved, our race *is* hard, so we read in v.1: *run with **endurance***. **Two** words have appeared over & over in the second half of *Hebrews*: *faith & endurance*.
 - a. **Read 10:36-39**. Comment on **36** – *endurance*; **38** – *faith*; **39** – *faith*
 - b. Don't forget **Hebrews 11**. Faith's heroes *endured* life's trials, motivated by their *faith* in God's *better promise* (Messiah). **V.27** (e.g.) – Moses *endured, as seeing Him* (Jesus) *who is unseen*.
 - c. Our text this morning: **v.1** –*run w/endurance*; **v.2** – *author & perfecter of faith*; *endured the cross*; **v.3** – *He endured hostility*.
 - d. **We get the picture**: *endurance* is *essential* to finishing *faith's marathon* and, in fact, *faith & endurance* seem inseparable.
 - e. In Hebrews 11 we learned that *faith* produces *courage*. It would also seem that *faith* is the *fuel* of *endurance*. One of the *by-products* of *saving faith* is "run to the finish line" *endurance*.

3. How does *faith* produce *endurance*? The Gospel is full of promises that when you *trust* God, He *sees you through* to the end. Let's consider **one** promise from the **OT** & **one** from the **NT**:

- a. **OT: Isa 40:31** - *Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.*
 - i. *New strength...wings like eagles, untired running, unwearied walking... That sounds like the marathon of faith!*
 - ii. How do we get *new strength*...? As we “wait for the LORD” – **i.e., by faith!**

- b. **NT: Jude 24 (turn)** - *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,*
 - i. Who is the *object* of Jude's promise (...**keep you**)? *Christians – men & women w/ faith in Jesus. You and me!*
 - ii. How will you *run* the race? *Without stumbling!*
 - iii. How will you be at the *end*? *Standing! Blameless! Joyful!*
 - iv. Where will the *finish line* be marked? Where does this life's *race of faith* end? ***In the presence of His glory!***

The course is long & sometimes hard – you'll need faith to endure. And you will!

Look to (v.2).

1. A *pillar* was placed at the *finish line* of the marathon of the ancient Greek athletic games. A *wreath* was hung on the pillar – that *wreath* was the victor’s *prize*, it was every runner’s *motivation* to run hard and finish the race!
 - a. Our text points us to **two** *motivations* to run by faith.
 - b. The **first** (1) is the examples of the *heroes of faith* (ch.11), but now there is an even **greater** motivator to get in the race: *Jesus*.
2. But *how* is Jesus our motivator? **Let’s read v.2...**
3. **First**, we are inspired by His *great race* of enduring faith!
 - a. What does every aspiring young athlete do after watching the *Super Bowl* or *World Cup* or *World Series* or *Winter Olympics* or *Olympic Marathon*? He goes *out* the door and *heads* to the field! Championships & champions *inspire* us!
 - b. Jesus has *perfect faith* (He is perfect in every virtue) and that means He is the greatest “*faith marathoner*” of all time!
 - c. He is the “*author and perfecter of faith*” (NASB) and that can also be translated as the “*leader and finisher of the faith.*” Jesus *started* and *led* and *won* the *race of the faith*, and now He calls you to *follow* in His footsteps.

4. **Second**, Jesus understands that the race is *intimidating*. His own course was *agonizing* and *shameful*.
- a. Our Lord *endured the cross*. For **six** hours He hung there. For **three** of those hours He agonized, *forsaken*, under God's judgment – **for us**. His **first** words were: "*Father, forgive them...*" His **last** were: "*Into Thy hands I commend My spirit.*" And then He *breathed His last*.
 - b. But it wasn't just *death*, or even the *physical cruelty of the cross*. On the *cross*, the Son of God endured *shame* for us.
 - i. *Death by crucifixion* was the *lowest* form of disgrace imaginable. Roman law protected even the *lowest criminal* from crucifixion if he was a *Roman citizen*. A cross was so *shameful* it would besmirch the honor of Roman citizenship.
 - ii. And on Calvary, our Savior heard these taunting words: "*He trusts in God – let God rescue Him!* (Mt 27:43)" "*Come down from the cross, and we will believe* (Mk 15:30, 32). Even the *criminals* crucified beside Him found the *energy* to taunt Him.
 - iii. Then at the end of the day, they *hurried* Jesus' body *off* the cross and *into* a borrowed tomb.
 - c. But Jesus *endured* while *despising* ("counting as nothing") a *criminal's shame* and *taunting words*.
5. And by that *shameful death*, the crucified One secured *His joy*, and *ours*.
- a. The ancient athlete *ran to exhaustion* for a perishing wreath. The modern marathoner *trains for months & runs for a medal*.
 - b. Jesus ran for *joy*! The *joy* of knowing He'd accomplished exactly what God had sent Him to accomplish. "*It is finished!*"
 - i. *Finished*: To *die* on the cross in the place of His people to *pay* for their sins.
 - ii. *Finished*: By that one *payment* to provide *complete forgiveness* and a *new heart* and *eternal life*.

- iii. OTBW, the *only condition* to entering into the *life-transforming joy* of Jesus' death & resurrection is your *faith*, by *trusting* God that it's all true!
- c. Again, Jesus ran for *joy*! The *joy* of entering into the *heavenly of heavenlies* and being *seated at the right hand of God*.
 - i. This is an echo of almost the *very first truth* Hebrews taught us about Jesus! **1:3** – *after making propitiation for sins He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high!*
 - ii. God's *right hand* is the place of *honor* (God's Son, victor) and *authority* (all things under His feet) and *priestly intercession* (thus He lives to make intercession forever for the saints).
- 6. Friends, the call is to *step up* to the line, *start* the race, and *run* all the way to the finish line because though the race *is* hard, others have run it.
 - a. *Abel* and *Abraham* and *Moses* and *David* and *Jeremiah*.
 - b. Yet above *all these*, *fix your eyes on Jesus*, the Crucified and Risen One. *Jesus*, the *leader* of the heroic field of faithful saints. *Jesus*, the *first* across the finish line of the faith.

Listen to Him...look to Him...run after Him!

Finish strong (read v.3).

1. Do you ever feel like *leaving* the Christian faith? Do you know anyone who *has*?
 - a. The first churches to read Hebrews were filled with people who were considering *dropping out of the race*. Too much *pressure*, too much *shame*.
 - b. Maybe that's why the call is *repeated*: *Consider Him...*
 - c. Except IN the original language it's even *more intense* than in v.1& 2.
 - d. And the focus has narrowed from *running the race*, even *enduring* the race, to fighting the temptation to **quit** the race: having *grown weary* and *lost heart*.

2. There are many valuable, even vital, helps to Christian living, but the most important must be this: *consider Jesus!*
 - a. Of all the *true & necessary* things to know about Jesus (*deity, incarnation, resurrection, ascension, intercession, return*)...
 - b. When you are tired of *life and trials* and yes, even your *religion*, look long and hard at what Jesus *endured* for you!
 - i. The perfect Son of God willingly endured the *enmity* of unworthy sinners. The *suffering* and *shame* of the cross.
 - ii. The *hostility* of the very women & men He came to die for!
 1. **Rm 5:8** – *For God demonstrates His own love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!*
 - iii. Beloved, He *suffered & died* for you! And when you want to *quit*, a look at Jesus is *spiritual Red Bull* for your *weary soul!*

So that you may not grow weary and lose heart... so that you might not drop out of the race.

Why do people *refuse to start, or fail to finish, the race of faith!*

One reason suggested this morning is *shame*.

The NT *admits & warns* that the cross invites *shame* on its followers.

It's true! Here is what society thinks about you...

You are *naïve* if you believe the Bible is true.

You are a *theological bigot* if you repeat Jesus' exclusive claim that *no man comes to the Father but by Me*.

You can't be *cool* and be *sexually pure*.

You certainly won't be *tolerated* if you insist on a biblical definition of *marriage*: one man and woman united in a covenant relationship before God; everything else is a version of fornication/adultery.

You are now even labeled as "***Unchristian***" if you speak out *against* abortion!

Beloved, take heart! Jesus *suffered shame* for you! He calls you to follow His *footsteps*. The *race* may be hard. The *reward* will be worth it.

Look to Him. Despise the shame. Endure the Cross. Finish the course.

Others have done it before you. Jesus did it for you!

You can do it, too! You must....

...pray...