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The Backside of the Race, Part One

The Nature of Salvation

On this side of the grave you will never arrive when it comes to your walk with Christ! Though we are saved by grace, nevertheless Scripture speaks of our life in Christ as something that is being worked out.

1 Timothy 6:12, “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.”

Paul uses the boxing match as a metaphor of the calling of the believer! As such Christianity is not about arriving; it is about competing. Paul further exhorts, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

Truly salvation (which includes such things as sanctification and glorification) is not something we have as a package when we first believe in Christ. Salvation is something that God works out and in us over time! From this we conclude that when a person comes to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ they do not arrive. Rather they begin a race which will last for all eternity!

In light of this, we must see that Christianity involves such themes as perseverance, endurance, and the need for steadfastness. Listen to how Paul describes his walk with Christ:

1 Corinthians 9:26-27, "I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

Paul exhorts Timothy this way:

1 Timothy 4:16, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

The Hebrew writer exhorts us this way:

Hebrews 12:1, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

As a race, salvation involves perseverance, endurance, and steadfastness! Yet here is where much delusion and misinformation exists in the body of Christ today. We think that because we are in Christ

- Life should be easy.
- It should be filled with blessing.
- That our relationships will know little of the curse.
- That our walks will be intimate.
- That we will have an easier go than the non-Christian.

But then we enter into reality and find that very little of the above characterizes our lives. Our relationships aren't blessed; divorce in the church has surpassed that of the world. We struggle in our walks. Our prayer-life is in shambles. Our study of the Word of God is inconsistent. And to make matters worse not only do we know the struggles of the worldling when it comes to bitter providences but we experience deeper levels of guilt, regret, and conviction on account of the presence of the Spirit of God in our lives.

And yet what do we do in response?

We do not challenge the assertion or the teaching that if you are in Christ your life will be easier. Rather we conclude one of two things:

1. Either we are mutant Christians- for everyone else's walk seems to be O.K.
2. Or that God has sold us short.

Both of which do very little in encouraging us in our walks.

What is the message that God would give to all His servants tirelessly working out their salvation? What is God's word to the spiritual athlete fighting the good fight of faith? What is God's word to the runner who has entered upon the backside of the race?

I dare say there is not a better passage than ours to give us the answer to these questions.

The Book of Hebrews was written to three different peoples, all Jewish. First there are those who had

made careful search and inquiry into the claims of Christ, but in the end had opted to reject Him.¹ There are also those who had been confronted with the claims of Christ, and yet were not willing to make a decision. As such they were fence-riders.² And finally there are those who had accepted Christ as their Messiah, were consequently persecuted, and so in need a encouragement.³

As such this epistle contains exhortations to all three groups. Now one such exhortation is found in Hebrews 10:26.⁴

Hebrews 10:26-31, “For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

This is a brutal passage which though written to the Jew who had rejected Christ, nevertheless would not have been much of an encouragement to the genuine child of God. In fact, it might even discourage the genuine believer who thinks this way: “Not only have I got it tough in life, and I feel like a loser! But now I'm told it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of a living God!”

Accordingly, just as in Hebrews 6 where a harsh exhortation of judgment is followed by a word of consolation,⁵ so it is here. So following the very difficult message of verses 26-31, we read our text. It is a passage written

- To encourage the fainting heart.
- To refresh the weary soul.
- To capture the attention of the weary pilgrim and inspire them unto greater service in the name of the King.
- To encourage the Athlete on the backside of the race.

Well Begun Is Half Done

Let us consider this passage which gives us three words of exhortation. Notice the first thing we learn is that well begun is half done.

Hebrews 10:32-33, “But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, [or after being saved] ye endured a great fight⁶ of afflictions⁷; partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.”

¹ Compare Hebrews 6:1-8

² Compare Hebrews 3-4

³ Compare Hebrews 6:9-11

⁴ This is similar to the exhortation found in Hebrews 6:1-8

⁵ Compare Hebrews 6:9

⁶ αθλησις *athlesis* This is the root for our word, *athletics*.

⁷ παθεμα *pathema*

Recall the Jewish notion of “remembering” is not simply calling to mind, but actually reliving an event in ones mind. And the Hebrew writer is asking them to relive the sufferings that have endured. Here the word *affliction* reminds them both of Christ's sufferings and the believers' suffering for His sake. It is described here as “a great conflict of sufferings.” Therefore we conclude that what was in mind are NOT the paper-cuts of life BUT severe, intense pressure which is manifested in real and tangible attacks, ridicule, injury, harms and hardship.

In fact the phrase, “great conflict of suffering” is an athletic metaphor referencing the grueling aspects of Roman sport. For example, in Roman boxing, the winner received the perishable wreath referenced by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:25 while the losers had their eyes plucked out. So the picture here is of a newly created body of believers who on account of their faith suffered great loss and harm. And it was this that they were called to “remember.”

And yet what does this imply?

This Epistles indicates that the Christian Hebrews had known many difficult days imprisoned to their sin. They were born with a passion to win God's approval by virtue of their deeds.⁸ Yet they never could; they always failed such that when they went to offer a sacrifice for their sin, they were assured NOT of God's forgiveness, BUT of their own failing.

Hebrews 10:3-4, “But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.”

As a result, they lived in fear enslaved to the elemental things of this world. Christ came so that He could “deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:15). You can imagine the freedom that knowledge of Christ's work on the cross meant to them. Embracing their “Lamb of God”⁹ they were relieved not only of their burden to God, but of ten thousand temporal burdens besides.

And this gratitude lead them to the place where they could say

- Lord, I don't care what happens! I've got Christ. What else do I need?
- Take my life! Ordain the bitter providence. I gladly will accept it.
- You have given me life; I'll do whatever You will.

God's Providence willed for the Hebrew Christians to suffer greatly. And they willingly accepted it! Notice the two-fold suffering they underwent.

Hebrews 10:33, “Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock¹⁰ both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used.”

When a Roman general won a major victory it was celebrated by what was called a Triumph. The general would enter the city in great military splendor, leading his officers and troops. Behind those would come a select-group of prisoners in chains, with the conquered king and his officers prominently displayed for

⁸ Compare Genesis 2:15-17

⁹ Compare John 1:29

¹⁰ θεατριζω *theatrizo* from this word we get our word *theater*.

all to see and mock. The prisoners were under the sentence of death such that following the Triumph they would be taken to the arena to be torn apart by wild beasts. The word used of these prisoners was *spectacle*. And that is the spectacle which the Hebrew writer is referring to here.

Salvation alone makes us enemies of this age, the dregs of society, and so the scum of the world.¹¹ As such we are fools who, as the condemned soldier in a Roman Triumph, are the object of

- Ridicule.
- Scorn.
- Laughter.

And such was the experience of these Hebrew Christians when they entered into a saving relationship with Christ. Yet that was not all. Their suffering also was on account of the life which their faith led them to.

Hebrews 10:33, “Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions¹² of them that were so used.”

In the Roman penal system, prisoners had to fend for themselves. When one was accused of a crime and put in jail¹³ he didn't eat unless someone brought food. Rome certainly wasn't going to feed you, nor would your Jewish family who disowned you on account of Christ! Yet this raised a problem for the early church, if I bring food to a reputed “hater of the state” on account of their refusal to worship Caesar, then I myself risk being accused along with them and placed in the same rotting cell!¹⁴

This led to a quandary. Do I risk not only my well-being but the well-being of my wife and children, and help another Christian in prison?¹⁵ Or, do I forsake the brother in need and look out for my God-given first charge of my wife and children?

What would you do?

These early Christians opted to become a partaker or fellowship sharer with those so treated. The text continues:

Hebrews 10:34, “For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.”

Talk about being on fire for the Lord! Talk about conviction! Talk about a living faith which ushered itself into action!

When given the choice to play it safe, stay home, and just focus on themselves and their families **or to** entrust themselves to God and so minister to the body of Christ; these baby Christians opted for the

¹¹ Compare 1 Corinthians 4:13

¹² κοινωνος koinonos The term could also be rendered fellowshippers.

¹³ Like the French legal system, you are guilty until proven innocent.

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce wrote, “Prisoners who had no means of their own were liable to starve unless their friends brought them food and whatever other form of help they required; the visiting of their friends who were in prison was a regular, though dangerous, duty of Christian charity.” ([The Epistle to the Hebrews](#) New International Commentary of the New Testament, Published 1990 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, ISBN 0802825141 page 270)

¹⁵ This is what Christ did in His incarnation. He associated with those in prison on account of sin!

latter. And they paid the price for showing “sympathy to the prisoners” and by “suffering with them.” Their property was confiscated. Their well-being threatened. Their families were put out into the cold.

What an incredible start when it came to walking with Christ! Though they could not see their Savior, nevertheless their love for Him and His grace was such that they willingly suffered for His name! From this I want you to notice that the Christian race we call salvation begins with a good start!

And this is true for every Christian. While there are few listening to me who have had to face the persecution referenced in our text, nevertheless with the Hebrews we all can recall past days of diligence and vigilance. We can remember how such concepts as

- God's providence.
- The cross work of Christ.
- Limited atonement.
- Devotion.
- The word of God.
- Purity.
- Forgiveness.
- Mercy.
- Grace.

were not cold, theological assertions or duties, but our very heartbeat. In fact, so universal is the “well-begun” race of Christianity, that Scripture oft-times uses it as the basis to encourage the child of God to diligent service in their walks. For example¹⁶ the church in Ephesus had grown cold in their walk with Christ.

Revelation 2:5, “**Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works;** or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

Like the Hebrews, the Christians in Ephesus were in need of encouragement. Their walks had been compromised. Their love had grown cold. They were drifting through life rather than striving toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God. As such, Christ's exhortation was a simple one: **REMEMBER FROM WHERE YOU HAVE FALLEN!** Remember God’s forgiveness. Remember how God's grace prompted you boldly and with gratitude to suffer for His name.

Now Christ could give this exhortation because there are no

- Partial births in the Kingdom of God.
- Ill-formed believers.
- Christian mutants born with half a faith.

All start well!

Galatians 5:7, “Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?”

¹⁶ There are many such passages that could be referenced here, but I am only going to use one. For another example look at Galatians 4:14-15; 5:7.

And that is why every one of us has fond memories of what our walk once was like. When

- Our love was deep.
- Our passion was stronger.
- Our walk was consistent.
- We approached the word with anticipation and excitement.
- Our relationship with Christ was quite personal.

The recipients of our epistle remembered these things. Though they were new believers, nevertheless their love for Christ drove them through the valley of the shadow of death and they did not shrink back. Based upon their start, they were HALF DONE. They were HALF WAY THERE! All they needed to do was maintain what was begun and they'd arrive at the celestial shores.

Half Done is Where the Race Begins

This leads to an important truth, a truth which must become an important part of our confession of faith that half done is where the real race begins.

Hebrews 10:35-36, “Cast not away¹⁷ therefore your confidence¹⁸, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”

In short races, like the sprint, the start is everything. The first ten to fifteen yards can make or break you. Yet that is not true in the Marathon. The grueling twenty-six mile competition pushed athlete's bodies to the edge in order to win.¹⁹

Now, here is where the backside of the race makes the difference, not between winning or losing, but between finishing the race and washing out. It is at the backside of the race that

- There is no fan-fare.
- There is little encouragement.
- The other competitors have their focus primarily on themselves because they too are hurting.
- There is little if no accountability.

As such one can coast, and no one will know. One can walk, and few will care. One can loose the way, and few will notice. And of the two races, it is obvious from the texts we already have seen that Christianity is more akin to the marathon! One man wrote this: “The Christian race is a marathon, a long-distance race, not a sprint. The church has always had many short-spurt Christians, but the Lord wants those who will 'make the distance.'”²⁰

¹⁷ ἀποβαλλῶ apoballo to cast or fling away as one throws out the rubbish

¹⁸ παρρησία parrhesia

¹⁹ Recall where the word *marathon* came from. In 490 BC, the Athenians won a crucial and decisive battle over the Persians led by Darius I on a plain near the small Greek coastal village of Marathon. As a result, one of the Greek soldiers ran nonstop from the battlefield to Athens in order to carry the important news that: victory had been attained, Athens could rest at ease, no more sons and fathers would die today in battle. Yet he ran with such unreserved effort that he fell dead at the feet of those to whom he delivered the message. In fact, it is from this we not only get the name, “Marathon,” but we also get the length of the race- just over 26 miles which was the distance from the city of Marathon to Athens.

²⁰ Dr. John MacArthur, *Hebrews: New Testament Commentary (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series*, Moody Publishers, 1983, **ISBN-10**: 0802407536 page 373

Now if that is so, the questions we ask are these: What is the key to succeeding in a marathon? What is the difference between washing out and completing the race?

Be Confident

Hebrews 10:35, “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.”

The first answer to these questions is this: Don’t throw away your confidence. The word for confidence is used four times in this epistle²¹ all of which denote the idea of boldness, courage, and steadfastness. For example we are exhorted to “hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end” (Hebrews 3:6). That is the idea behind this word with emphasis on a steadfastness in adverse and disheartening circumstances.

Weed the Garden

I'll never forget as a child during summer vacation, I'd be on my way out the door to go swimming and I'd hear my dad's booming voice, “Greg! Before you go to the pool I want you to weed the garden!”

Weed the garden? It was 95 degrees and the garden was big with no shade!

Well you know how I weeded the garden. I'd see that weed next to a radish plant and both would go. Truly, I didn't have “steadfastness in adverse and disheartening circumstances.” The goal was to get the job over so that I could get out of the heat and into the pool.

And this is where the backside of the finds many of us. We start well, but then

- The children come.
- The job is stressful.
- The demands on time increase.
- We fail to overcome a sin.
- We get beat down by life.

And rather than maintaining our confidence, we throw it way to avert pain. We cast out the grace which at one time meant so much to us as if we were throwing out garbage. And thus we lose that which we did at the beginning!

And thus the calling on the backside of the race is to hold fast and to boldly cling to the faith by which we have been saved. The exhortation is to remain steadfast! It is as Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 15:58, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

Yes this world is a place of sin and misery such that

²¹ Compare Hebrews 4:16; 10:19; 3:6; 10:35

- You do not go where you wish.
- You must do this and you must do that.
- Anything less would be irresponsible.

Yet Paul's encouragement is that, when it comes to the Well-Begun Race, we not loose heart, but rather endure! Paul exhorted the persecuted Christians in Colossae to “continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard” (Colossians 1:23).

Long had been the trial and hardship at Colossae such that the believers began placing their sights, hopes, love, and joy on the things of this world²² such that

- The things of the Lord no longer were as important.
- Fidelity... integrity... purity... no longer were the concern.

Accordingly Paul gave an exhortation of diligence and steadfastness! Truly they must continue in that which they began!

Now to the church on the verge of growing weary in their pace, Paul exhorts:

2 Thessalonians 3:13, “But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.”

To the church in Thyatira, Christ said this:

Revelation 2:25, “But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.”

Truly as long-distance runners when the pain begins welling up in our side and our legs weaken and the fan-fare is gone, the focus must become one thing... Steadfastness!

Vanity Fair

This brothers and sisters is our calling! It is the difference between finishing the race and washing out. It must be our concern.

Yet sadly on the backside of the race we run through what Bunyan called, Vanity Fair. Vanity Fair is a city which promises weary runners the best that this world has to offer... yet without the pain!! You must know that this city has claimed many a runner.

- Those in a difficult job are told that lying will get the boss of your back.
- Those in a difficult life-stage are told that time with the Lord is optional.
- Those in a difficult marriage are told that divorce will take away the arguments and pain.
- Those enduring a bitter providence are told that God doesn't love you.
- Those struggling under a recurring sin are told that God certainly couldn't forgive you.

Such thoughts and temptations are real and easily relieved if we would but lessen our pace... get off the path... and become a citizen of Vanity Fair.

Christian let us purpose now and place this as an important part of our confession of faith: The race in

²² Compare Colossians 3:1-2

which we are engaged is a marathon. As such we are marathon runners in competition not with others, but against our flesh. The flesh says: “Look around! Few are vigilant! Compromise!” Yet the Lord says

- “Be Steadfast!”
- “Do the things you did at the beginning!”
- “Don't grow weary or loose heart!”
- “Endure!”

Great Reward

And if we will endure there is a great reward promised in our passage.

Hebrews 10:35, “Cast not away therefore your confidence, **which hath great recompence of reward.**”.

The great reward is nothing less than

- The “well-done thou good and faithful slave.”
- The joy of being there at the finish line to be embraced not only by the heavenly host, but by Christ Himself.
- The reunion with loved-ones lost.
- The beholding of Christ in His glory.
- The wiping away of all tears.
- The entering into the joy of the Master.

Steadfastness is THE theme of our walk on the Backside of the Race. It is NOT

- Growing in leaps and bounds.
- Having deeper and more vivid experiences.
- Entering into a higher plane.

RATHER it is getting through this portion of the race having maintained what we had at the beginning! The Hebrew writer penned these words:

Hebrews 12:1-4, “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”

Need For Endurance

And yet there is more. Not only are we to be careful not to throw away our confidence and so fail to be steadfast in our faith, but there is a second exhortation.

Hebrews 10:36, “For ye have need of patience²³, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”

The word *patience* comes from a military term used of an army's holding a vital position at all costs. It is not a passive resignation or even a strong enduring, but an active fortitude. It addresses the duration of our steadfastness!

- How long ought I to cling to the hope that Christ's plans for me are for my well-fare?
- How much evidence must I behold before I deny God's word?
- How much pressure must I endure before it is O.K. to compromise my purity?
- How long should I persist in doing it God's way before I am free to do it my way?

The calling here adds endurance to steadfastness such that the conviction that governs us on the backside of the race is that never, no matter what happens, who opposes me, the iniquity of the day, how long Christ tarries, NEVER ought we to compromise our hope, the gospel, His truth, or our purity! Dr. John MacArthur wrote this:

“There are many people in the ministry who serve for a while but quickly fade away. They're like shooting stars or short candles. In contrast, [genuine servants]... die with their boots on... The true mark of an excellent servant of Jesus Christ is that he fulfills his calling to the end.”²⁴

Philip Hughes said, “Patient endurance and faithful performance of the will of God, indeed, are together a true expression of the imitation of Christ...”²⁵

Now I hope you are hearing this, for it impacts everyone of us here this day! You must see from all of this that PERSEVERANCE is what we must all be about today! As a preacher who himself is on the backside of the race ministering to a church which clearly is on the backside of the race, from time to time I've observed a variety of false notions and expectations.

- Why isn't my walk deeper?
- Why isn't my marriage better?
- Where is the joy?
- You call this the higher life?

Now to be sure there is nothing inherently wrong with desiring

- A deeper walk.
- Greater intimacy in your relationship with God.
- A better marriage.
- Godlier children.

The problem comes when we cast off the deeds we did at the beginning — our steadfastness and perseverance — in favor of

²³ ὑπομονή *hupomone*

²⁴ Dr. John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church (Paperback)*, Moody Publishers (May 9, 1991), ISBN-10: 0802478417, quoted from the computer version in Logos Library.

²⁵ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (June 1987), ISBN-10: 0802803229, page 433

- The latest product marketed by the false preachers of our land.
- The newest fad.
- Another program.
- Another teaching.

I'm telling you right now that there are no short cuts. There are no miracle pills. There is no second blessing. Humanly speaking that which only will get you through the Backside of the Race is persevering in “doing what you did at the beginning” (Revelation 2:5)!

How you enter glory, and how you finish the race, will be determined NOT by your start, BUT by how steadfast and immovable you were in the middle of the race.

- Did you stop reading the word?
- Did you give up on fidelity to your calling in marriage to serve your spouse in favor of the excitement and fun of a cheap thrill?
- Did you lower your standards?
- Did you give up on grace?
- Did you run in your own strength?

Let us leave here with a renewed understanding of what Christianity as soldiers of the cross is all about. Having been saved by grace, we start our new life moved by grace such that we are

- Passionate about the word.
- Serious about God and His glory.
- Uncompromising.
- Bold in our faith.

Not in order to get God to love us, but because He loves us!

And do you know what the calling on the Backside of the Race is?

Don't

- Grow weary in doing well.
- Throw away our confidence.

Do

- Endure.
- Remember from where we have fallen.
- Continue in the things we did at the beginning.

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The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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