

## THE RACE, THE RUNNER AND THE RIBBON

INTRO: There is a message I have preached a number of times that I wrote while I was still in Bible school. I titled the message, *The Race, The Runner and the Ribbon*. I'm not sure what I have changed or added since but it is still basically the same. It is a message of encouragement, and I want to give it again this morning. I gave it at Tompkins some 9 years ago and some of you may remember some of it, but I trust it will come as new encouragement.

This epistle called 'Hebrews' was written to Hebrew speaking people. They were Jews who had become Christians and now they were looking back at where they had come from with longing eyes. Life was not easy for them as Christians and now, from all the warnings given in the book, we conclude they were in danger of apostatizing. And the writer of this epistle exhorts and warns and encourages them to get on with their Christian walk because Jesus Christ, the Lord, is superior to everything else. So in 12:12 he says, "Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather healed."

I too, get tired sometimes. There are times when, subtly, there run through my mind thoughts of retreat. I get tired and worn down and then I begin to think, "How could I get out of this all?" Every once in a while I need encouragement. Maybe that is where you are this morning. May the Lord encourage us from this passage this morning to move onward and upward.

Our text then is Hebrews 12:1-2 (read). So let us look first at:

### I. THE RACE

We have the Christian life set out before us here as a race. So this is not a literal race that is run in a short time. What is in view is the Christian life, pictured as a race. It is a race that is entered at salvation, and it is a race only the saved run. The unsaved are not running this race. If you are a Christian, you are in this race. If you are not a Christian, you are not in this race.

Now the word for race in the original language is *agona*. From this word 'agona' we get our word 'agony'. If you have ever run a long race, you know why it is called an 'agona'. You start off OK but then it gets harder and harder, and then breathing becomes painful and the race becomes an agony. You cannot run a race at your own desirable pace. You have to get ahead of others and they have to try to get ahead of you. How is the Christian life for you? "Oh", you say, "you don't know how close I come to giving up sometimes. You don't know how I wrestle at times. If you only knew my inner turmoils you would wonder if I'm a Christian." That's it! That's the agony. Right in the midst of that I want to encourage you onward.

In a literal race one must qualify to run. Let us say you are going to run for our great country of Canada in the Olympics. In order to run for Canada you would first have to qualify. Only the best get to run for their country. In the spiritual race one has to qualify too and that qualification is that we must be saved or born again believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this race there are only believers. Furthermore, a literal race is started by some kind of a signal, like a gun shot. The new birth is both the qualification of the spiritual runner and the signal to run. And so from the moment of salvation we begin to run and we run for as long as we live.

Now I want us to notice from Hebrews 12:1 that this race has spectators. We are told that in this race there is a great cloud of witnesses. Spectators who cheer a runner on are a great encouragement to the runner. A good number of years ago our oldest daughter was in a race. We lived at Three Hills at the time and it was the school sports day. Well my daughter ran well and finished well, but her good friend could hardly endure the race. After our daughter finished her race she saw her friend and she was in an agony. She could hardly keep going, but the rules were that everybody must finish the course. My wife and I were watching. We saw the sympathy on our daughters face. Then we watched as she ran up alongside her friend and ran with her, encouraging her to finish.

That tired young lady is a picture of the Hebrew people in this race. She was faint and weary and would have giving up is what she wanted more than anything else. The Hebrews to whom this epistle was written were ready to give up. Maybe that is a picture of some of us this morning. Then the author of this letter comes alongside and encourages these Christians to keep going. Not only does he encourage them to keep going but he points to the spectators and shows these weary runners many of those who have already run the race and these spectators are encouraging them onward. Notice verse 1, "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 that is set before us..."

Who is this great cloud of spectators? Well, we have them in chapter 11, the chapter someone has called 'the hall of faith'. You see, there in the stands is 'Abel' (read 11:4). Here is a runner who ran so faithfully that it cost him his life. You see, the writer of this epistle has told those he is seeking to encourage that they have not even resisted unto blood. None of them have been persecuted to such an extent that they died or lost blood for it. The first spectator he mentions here died for his faith so get up and get going again. And 11:4 says that though Abel is dead, he still speaks. And what does he say? Get going! He speaks to you and to me from the stands and he says, "Never give up. Keep going, no matter what the cost."

Then in verse 5 we have, Enoch; verse 7 Noah; verse 8 Abraham. Oh what it cost some of these to run the race, but now they are spectators and cheer us on by the very life that they lived. Think of Abraham. Think of what he must have endured as he took his only son up the mountain. Think of what he endured in the race when his only son said, "Daddy, we have the wood and the fire but where is the sacrifice?" What must it have cost Abraham when he knew that sacrifice was his Son? Oh you can go through this list of spectators and one after another you will find runners who almost fainted (read 35-38).

Many have asked the question, "Do those who have gone on to heaven know what is going on now here on earth?" I do not know how much they know of what is going on but I believe they know at least some of the things that happen on earth. One of the passages that confirms this to me is a verse that is most often misquoted. Here is the misquoted verse, "The angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner that repents." Did you know that the Bible does not say that? Turn with me to Luke 15:10. You see, this verse does not say that the angels rejoice. It says there is rejoicing in the presence of angels. Now I ask you, who is there in the presence of angels? It would not be right to say that God or Jesus are in the presence of angels. No, angels are in the presence of God. So who is there in the presence of angels? I believe, especially from Scriptures such as Revelation 4-5 that it is the Christians who have died who are in the presence of angels.

There are a few spectators in heaven who by the very life they lived, cheer me on in my race. I think of my uncle Henry. He was a man who lived the pleasures of life to the full until he met the Lord. When he met the Lord, his life took a drastic turn around. From that time until he died of leukemia he was a shining witness for the Lord. When he was in his last days they did not shave him because of the pain. One of the nurses teased him about being Santa Claus that year, since it was just before Christmas. He said, "Yes and if I was Santa Claus I'd bring you the gift of salvation."

How many have gone on before us? How many have endured great pain or persecution? How many had deep inner trials? Yet they persevered, they endured. I encourage you, dear Christian, move onward and upward. Let looking back never be an alternative.

## II. THE RUNNER

Let us consider the runner for a moment. We mentioned earlier that those running the race must qualify. To qualify we must be born again. No non-Christian runs this race. Now I'd like to point out that those who run must run by the rules. There is one rule that stands out above all others. We find it in Hebrews

chapter 11. (Note all by faith verses). I define faith as *a present belief held on the basis of the facts of Scripture which gives me hope for the future.*

Faith is that which I am persuaded to believe is true. Biblical faith is based on the facts of Scripture. But any faith that is even worth considering is one that gives me hope for the future. If my definition is correct then atheism is not a faith because there is no hope for the future for the atheist. What element of faith was it that encouraged these OT saints to suffer mockings, scourgings, torture, being stoned or slain or sawed in pieces? Hebrews 11:35, it was the better resurrection. They desired, according to verse 16 a better country, a heavenly country. They looked for a city whose builder and maker is God. You see, their faith gave them hope for the future. Do you have that? Or need we be reminded that the end of a life that turns its back to the ribbon leaves one with a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries (Heb. 10:27)?

In our passage several principles of running the spiritual race are pointed out. Hebrews 12:1 says, "...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us..." Let's look at this by beginning with the sin which so easily ensnares us. It is believed by many that this sin is the sin of unbelief. I tend to agree with that. When we get disheartened and discouraged unbelief is ever ready to spring its deadly trap. As soon as it finds a little room in us we begin to falter and slow down in the race. Nothing will immobilize us like unbelief. As soon as unbelief gets a foothold we begin to say, "God will help everybody but me. I'll never amount to anything anyway. God loves others more than me. I'm just a failure anyway. Why did I pull that booboo. Now I'll never make it. Why do others have all the gifts? Why is my life so hard?" Down, down we go.

Then we are exhorted to lay aside every weight. Every experienced runner will put aside everything that weighs them down. When the running gets tough and one's lungs scream for air every extra ounce is

pound. Let me set out a few that I see as weights in the Christian's life:

- Inappropriate language
- Leisure/Recreation/Sports
- TV/Videos/Music
- Fashion: Hair/clothing/jewelry
- Anxieties/fears
- Friends
- Worldliness
- Possessions

When we mention some of these things you say, "Oh, what's wrong with that?" This isn't sin, that isn't sin. I did not say it was sin. They are weights and every ounce of weight keeps us from being all for God we ought to be. I think that it is time the Christian again considers the dangers of worldliness.

John Bunyan pictures several forms of worldliness in the alegory, Pilgrim's Progress. He calls this place in the journey "Vanity Fair." He says that you cannot journey to the celestial city without going through this city. Here are his words, "Now I said the way to the Celestial City lies just through the town where this lusty fair is kept: and he that will go to the city, and yet not go through this town 'must needs go out of this world.'" There is no escaping this place and this place is no friend to Christianity according to Bunyan's account. Furthermore he writes, "This fair, therefore, is an ancient thing, of long standing, and a very great fair." When Christian and his friend entered this city, writes Bunyan, "...all the people of the fair were moved, and the town itself, as it were, in a hubbub..."

Then he lists some of the reasons that Christian and his friend caused such a stir in this place called vanity fair: First, their clothing was different from that of those in Vanity Fair. Second, their speech was different and third, they were unimpressed by all the wares of Vanity Fair.

Well, the writer to the Hebrews is encouraging these discouraged runners to lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares.

Let us notice one more principle of running this race. It is found at the close of verse 1, "...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Every born again believer has a race stretched out before him or her from the moment of salvation. This race may be long or short. It will have hills and valleys; it will have beautiful places and ugly places. It will present joyous times and times of sorrow. And the instruction given here is that we are to run with *endurance*.

The word endurance is *hupo + meno*, and means 'to abide' or 'remain' under. We are told sometimes that we are to live above our circumstances. The gist of that teaching is correct but the picture is wrong. The Scripture pictures us as bearing up under our circumstances. All of us have circumstances to bear up under. I would dare say that the more you give yourself to this race the more you likely have to bear up under. The challenge of the writer here is to run with endurance.

### III. THE RIBBON

In verse 2 we are given some very important instructions with regard to running in this race. Picture a race. The ribbon is within sight of the runners. The lead runner can taste victory and then he hears another runner and it sounds as though he is gaining ground on him. And in a moment of doubt he turns to see how close this runner is and if he is gaining. He has committed a runner's error that is hard to keep from making. And in that moment of hesitation with the expense of extra energy, his opponent gains enough to touch the ribbon first.

Here is the instruction of verse 2: Keep your eyes on the ribbon. Our text says, "...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..." Now let me make, what I believe a necessary correction to the translation of this phrase. The word translated *our* faith should be, *the* faith. I do not want to take time to defend that translation except to say the Greek says "...the faith." Jesus Christ is the author and the perfecter of that faith that will carry each runner right through the whole race.

What I want to spend some time on is the phrase, "...looking unto Jesus..." This could more literally be translated, "...looking away to Jesus." Kenneth Wuest translates it like this, "...looking off and away to Jesus..." When we put our eyes on Jesus we will take them away from some other things that we need to get our eyes off of. The Lord Jesus told us that no man having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God (Lk. 9:62). Now both these words for looking are in the present tense, indicating a continuous looking. Our instruction is to keep looking, continually to Jesus. And to never look back 'continually'.

The first thing I suggest that we look away from is the race itself with all its trials and difficulties. If we look at the race with its valleys and treacherous terrain we will faint on the way. Maybe you have some present circumstance that is draining your energies because you have fixed your eyes on the race. This morning is a time to get our eyes off and away from the race and onto the Lord Jesus.

The second thing I suggest we look away from when we get our eyes on Jesus is others in the race. I might think I'm doing real well when I compare myself with others but I am looking at the wrong thing. Or I might feel like I'm nothing, I don't amount to anything when I look at others and thus fall further behind. I might look at others who are laden with weights or even sin and take on some such weights myself. But if I keep my eyes on Jesus, I shall never get sidetracked or disheartened for He invites, "Come unto me..."

The third thing we need to get our eyes off of is ourselves. Our whole philosophy of self esteem, whether we call it good self esteem or bad self-esteem, needs a thorough Scriptural visitation. If we keep our eyes on ourselves we are doomed for trouble. Dave Anderson, in his column Straight Talk From The Business Doctor, in the Wednesday, August 2/00 edition of our local newspaper, The Pioneer, writes, "Very little is more important to human beings than their own self-esteem."

The text is clear. I am to look away from everything else and fix my gaze on Jesus. Now there is not any

possible way to look at Jesus other than through the writings of Scripture. There is no good runner who does not love and cherish and read the Bible. If we are runners in the eternal race then we will need to spend much time in the Word of God. You cannot look to Jesus without looking into the written Word. D.L. Moody said, "This book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book." If I could be an influence for one thing this morning, if there is one request I have of you it is this, to resolve to read your Bible faithfully. I know that if we do not do this we will not be looking unto Jesus and if we are not looking to Jesus we will not be very successful in this race.

This verse tells us that Jesus too ran a difficult race. If Jesus our master ran a difficult race should we think that ours will be easy? Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?

CONCL: We have briefly looked at this passage under the title: *The Race, The Runner and The Ribbon*. We said the race is an agony. It is no bed of roses. It is trials; difficulties; valleys; sorrows; problems but at the end is the Lord Jesus and the Celestial City. We saw that the runner is to lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us. F.B. Meyer says "Thousands of Christians are like water-logged vessels. They cannot sink; but they are so saturated with inconsistencies, and worldliness, and permitted evil, that they can only be towed with great difficulty into the celestial port."

How is it dear Christian runner? Has the Lord drawn your attention to some inconsistency, some area of worldliness, some sin? May I encourage you not to look at others but the Lord Jesus and then correct any such area. The Lord will give both the grace and the courage if you look to Him.

Last, I encourage you from the text itself to look away from those things that discourage and pull you down and look to Jesus. He is the author of the faith that will carry you through. He too, looked to the ribbon, our text says it was the joy that was set before him. And He endured, not only life with its difficulties but the cross of Calvary and now He has attained the ribbon and is set down at the right hand of God.

