

58-12-02.wpd --The Race Before Us
 race, hindrances, witnesses, faith, endurance
 Heb 12:1-3

To finish life with victorious faith, we must stay on track with Jesus.

INTRODUCTION:

--Heb 12 comes right after a long list of *faith heroes* in Heb 11. It takes those heroes and puts them into a metaphor illustrating our own journey of faith. That metaphor is my sermon title, **The Race Before Us**, from **v.1**, *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. HOM.idea.*

--The author of Hebrews used the metaphor of the Grecian games, which was a favorite one Paul also used, to illustrate the victory we are to pursue in the Christian life. I hope you can use your imagination to get into this metaphor with me. First, let's look at the setting...

I. Getting Ready to Run, v.1

A. [You are an athlete about to run in a cross country marathon. Spectators, seated on hillsides and standing along the sidelines of the racing path, are cheering, But you hear cheering from higher up, from "*a great cloud of witnesses*" high above the earth. These are the *heros of faith* seated in a cloudy stadium, watching you run and cheering you on to win the race.]

1. These heavenly spectators are called "*a great cloud of witnesses*," not only because they are now in the clouds of Heaven, but that word [*nephos*, "*mass of clouds*"] is also used to describe a large multitude (more than just those listed in the Faith Chapter. It can describe *great Christians in history, little known heroes, faithful friends and devout family members who, though gone, are watching us.*)
2. They are called "witnesses" for two reasons:
 - a. They bore witness to the faith during their earthly journeys.
 - b. From Heaven, they are witnessing how we will run our race.

B. [You're enjoying the heavenly cheering, when suddenly the other athletes shock you by removing all their clothes. As they all stretch and warm up, you alone stand there in your robe and tunic. Then you see among the "*cloud of witnesses*" someone shouting at you, "*let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" You now realize how these naked athletes will have an advantage over you. They have no extra weight and their clothing won't cling to them as they run. So, you finally decide to strip down to your birthday suit, and join them.]

1. The writer of Hebrews took advantage of the well-known custom in Greek competition of athletes stripping themselves bare when competing, and he used this in his metaphor to describe how Christians must seek victory in faith by stripping off...
 - a. "*everything that hinders*" [RSV, "*lay aside every weight*"]
 - (1) the weight of clothing [interesting that "*habit*" used to refer to clothing] What *habits* do we take on that hinder our spiritual progress? What *habits* do we display merely to draw attention to ourselves? [biblical modesty in dress is about not trying to attract attention to yourself]
 - (2) the weight of extra fat [exercising to lose weight has always been the practice of athletes] What spiritual disciplines or exercises help us stay trim and ready to run the spiritual race?
 - b. "*the sin that so easily entangles*" [RSV, "*the sin which clings so closely*"] (Greek runners divested themselves of entangling garments, but we must get free of clinging sins that entangle us, which we do by confession-- 1 John 1:9, If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.)

TRANS: [You've warmed up, an official has explained the boundaries of the course, and the race has begun. It's a long one, and after a little while, you realize how hard it is to "*hang in there.*" The cheering is fine, but it's not enough.] "*...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*" How do we persevere?

II. The Source of Our Stamina, v.2-3

- A.** Our faith is encouraged by the "*great cloud of witnesses*" but our eyes must stay focused on the One who engendered our faith and brings it to maturity-- **v.2**, *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*
1. Those who have gone before us in faith have great stories to tell and great encouragements to give, but they all needed the helping hand of God, just as we do.
 2. Jesus stayed on track until He was *victorious*:
 - a. He was motivated by the "joy set before him" which was to see the redemption of humanity and all the rest of creation.

- b. His motivation made Him treat "the shame" of naked crucifixion with "scorn" (in other words, He belittled the cost of a shameful death for our sins in view of the victory He would win).
- c. Jesus is now "*at the right hand of the throne of God*" and in that position of ultimate power He can help us with every stride in the marathon race of life.

B. We persevere in the race by contemplating Christ's own endurance

1. The Grecian games including not just racing but wrestling and combat. The author of Hebrews switched to this metaphor to describe the "good fight of faith" fought by Christ Himself-- v.3, Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
2. The opposition that Christ endured was focused on *silencing His voice, stopping His ministry, and destroying His life*. Jesus was victorious in every one of these areas, and because of that...
 - a. He speaks encouragement to us in our race, not from the clouds, but right beside us through His Spirit.
 - b. He can still minister today to our needs in body, soul and spirit.
 - c. He infuses us spiritually with His own resurrection life, so that the promise of Isa 40:31 is fulfilled in our lives: "but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

CONCLUSION:

--To finish life with victorious faith, we must stay on track with Jesus. We are in a race, long marathon race of faith, and it is great to know that "*a great cloud of witnesses*" who have already crossed the finish-line are cheering us on from above. But to stay on track, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus. He has already won the victory, and as we hold on to Him by faith, His victory will take us also across that finish-line victoriously.

Heb 12:1-3 (NIV) Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. {2} Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. {3} Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.