Who Is In the "Great Cloud of Witnesses," and What Are They Watching?
Scripture: Hebrews 12:1
Code: BQ031513

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. (12:1)

The key phrase of this passage is **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**. In the book of Hebrews, as in many places in the New Testament, “let us” may refer to believers, to unbelievers, or to both. As a matter of courtesy and concern, an author frequently identifies himself with those to whom he is writing, whether or not they are fellow Christians.

In Hebrews 4 (vv. 1, 14, 16), for example, I think unbelievers are being addressed. Similarly, 6:1 speaks of unbelievers going on to the maturity of salvation. In 10:23–24, the reference can be both to believers and unbelievers.

In 12:1, I believe “let us” may be used to refer to Jews who have made a profession of Christ, but have not gone all the way to full faith. They have not yet begun the Christian race, which starts with salvation—to which the writer is now calling them. The truths, however, apply primarily to Christians, who are already running.

The writer is saying, “If you are not a Christian, get in the race, because you have to enter before you can hope to win. If you are a Christian, run with endurance; don’t give up.”

Unfortunately, many people are not even in the race, and many Christians could hardly be described as running the race at all. Some are merely jogging, some are walking slowly, and some are sitting or even lying down. Yet the biblical standard for holy living is a race, not a morning constitutional. **Race** is the Greek *agon*, from which we get agony. A race is not a thing of passive luxury, but is demanding, sometimes grueling and agonizing, and requires our utmost in self-discipline, determination, and perseverance.

God warned Israel, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure in the the mountain of Samaria” (Amos 6:1). God’s people are not called to lie around on beds of ease. We are to run a race that is strenuous and continuous. In God’s army we never hear “At ease.” To stand still or to go backward is to forfeit the prize. Worse yet is to stay in the stands and never participate at all, for which we forfeit everything—even eternal heaven.

Endurance (*hupomone*) is steady determination to keep going. It means continuing even when everything in you wants to slow down or give up. I can still remember the excruciating experience I had in high school when I first ran the half-mile. I was used to the 100-yard dash, which requires more speed but is over quickly. So I started out well; in fact I led the pack for the first 100 yards or so. But I ended dead last, and almost felt I was dead. My legs were wobbly, my chest was heaving, my mouth was cottony, and I collapsed at the finish line. That is the way many people live the Christian life. They start out fast, but as the race goes on they slow down, give up, or just collapse. 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.” There will be obstacles and there will be weariness and exhaustion, but we must endure if we are to win. God is concerned for steadfastness.

Many of the Hebrew Christians to whom the letter was written had started well. They had seen signs and wonders and were thrilled with their new lives (Heb. 2:4). But as the new began to wear off and problems began to arise, they began to lose their enthusiasm and their confidence. They started looking back at the old ways of Judaism, and around them and ahead of them at the persecution and suffering, and they began to weaken and waver.

Paul knew some Christians in the same condition, and to them he wrote, “Prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15) and “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. And 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” (1 Cor. 9:24–25).

Nothing makes less sense than to be in a race that you have little desire to win. Yet I believe the lack of desire to win is a basic problem with many Christians. They are content simply to be saved and to wait to go to heaven. But in a race or in a war or in the Christian life, lack of desire to win is unacceptable.

Paul believed this principle and he had a *hupomone* kind of determination. He did not pursue comfort, money, great learning, popularity, respect, position, lust of the flesh, or anything but God's will. "Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:26–27). That is what Christian commitment is all about.

The competition of the Christian life, of course, is different from that of an athletic race in two important ways. First, we are not to compete against other Christians, trying to outdo each other in righteousness, recognition, or accomplishments. Ours is not a race of works but a race of faith. Yet we do not compete with each other even in faith. We compete *by* faith, but not with each other. Our competition is against Satan, his world system, and our own sinfulness, often referred to in the New Testament as the flesh. Second, our strength is not in ourselves, but in the Holy Spirit; otherwise we could never endure. We are not called on to endure in ourselves, but in Him.

The Christian has only one way to endure—by faith. The only time we sin, the only time we fail, is when we do not trust. That is why our protection against Satan's temptations is "*the shield of faith*" (Eph. 6:16). As long as we are trusting God and doing what He wants us to do, Satan and sin have no power over us. They have no way of getting to us or of hindering us. When we run in the power of God's Spirit, we run successfully.

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