

Running the Race That Is Set Before Us

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-4

Code: 1254

If you'll turn in your Bible to Hebrews chapter 12 I want to talk to you about the first four verses. Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 4. One of the great texts in the Bible; one of the most familiar; one of the simplest really and yet one of the most profound. And I really just want to remind you of some very wonderful truths, wonderful realities that flow out of this great text. "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." And we'll stop right there.

Now you have in this brief text a figure of speech. The Christian life is likened unto a race. When we studied in seminary about how to teach and how to preach and they do teach that there, believe it or not, they used to tell us, and it's been reaffirmed by many others who taught speech, that you best communicate through the use of figures of speech, or analogies or similes or metaphors - those things that make up a figure of speech. A figure of speech is saying something in another way - by an illustration, a simile, a metaphor, whatever, an allegory.

The Bible uses many such figures to speak of the Christian life. Since the Christian life is an abstract thing in the sense that it's a word from God describing a spiritual thing and not a physical thing, it needs to be given some physical identity so we can better understand it. And so, for example, in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and in Ephesians 6, Paul describes the Christian life as warfare, and he talks about the armor of the Christian, and he talks about being a soldier of Jesus Christ. And in Ephesians chapter 6, also, Paul describes the Christian life as a wrestling match, and he says "I don't shadowbox, I don't fight as one that beats the air."

And then in Romans and many other places, Paul talks about the Christian life as a form of slavery and we are the bond-slaves of Jesus Christ. In 2 Timothy 2:6, he describes the Christian life as a farming operation, and he says "A hard-working farmer is likened unto a faithful Christian, who works diligently to plant his crop and then waits to see God give a harvest."

In Romans chapter 7, God likens the Christian life to marriage. He says your old marriage partner, the law, died and you're married to a new partner, Jesus Christ. And in many, many texts in the New

Testament, the Holy Spirit likens the Christian life to the relationship between a father and a son. We are often called the sons of the children of God.

One other one, and that's the one that appears here in Hebrews chapter 12 is that the Holy Spirit has likened the Christian life to a race - to a race. And this is a very common metaphor in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul says that "I run that I may obtain." He says "the worldly runners run to obtain a corruptible crown, but we, an incorruptible. And so we are striving to be temperate, to control our bodies, to strive for the mastery," he says, "that we might run to win."

And in Galatians Chapter 5, he reminds the Galatians: "You used to run well. Who has hindered you?" Then in Philippians again, in chapter 2, verse 16, you have the same idea: talking about running; "holding forth the word of life," which is kind of the motto of Grace Church, incidentally, "that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain." And he talks about running later on to Timothy in 2 Timothy Chapter 4. He says, "I fought a good fight. I have literally run my course."

So the Christian life, likened to many things, is also likened to a race. And that's what we want to look at as we examine these verses. Now, I want to give you several items here. I'm going to give you just some points in sequence to help open the passage to you:

Number 1 in Hebrews 12:1: The event; the event, and we'll start with the event. Let's begin at verse 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." Now what is the event? The event is a race. The writer of Hebrews is calling on the reader to get in the race and run it. I want you to notice just two words at the bottom of verse 1. They're the words: "let us." "Let us." One of the problems that you have in Hebrews in trying to interpret the book is to determine who the "us's" are in Hebrews.

I remember when I was a student in seminary, my professor when I studied the book of Hebrews was Dr. Charles Feinberg. And I wrote a paper for him in that class basically on "Who are the Us's in Hebrews?" To whom does he refer? The "us" of Christians or is it the "us" of Jews is basically the question. And in most cases, it is the broadest interpretation. Really, he is saying it the "us's" of all who are reading of a Jewish heritage. There's no doubt in my mind that the author of the book of Hebrews was Jewish. Beyond that, there's a lot of doubt. I don't know who it was, but he was Jewish. There is also no doubt that he was writing to the Jews. That's why it called "to the Hebrews." And so the whole analogy of the book is built around an understanding of Judaism. And he is commonly referring to his readers in the sense of their Jewishness rather than in the sense of their being saved necessarily. He calls, for example, the Jewish reader - brethren. Brethren, brethren. And when he wants to distinguish the Christian, he calls them holy brethren. So there's a distinction. So the brethren in Hebrews and the "us's" in Hebrews can encompass the total Jewish audience to whom he is speaking.

Now that brings us to understand this, then. That is he is saying, "let us run the race," and it is the broadest possible interpretation of his readers, we must understand who his readers are, and they fall into three categories. There somewhere was a little congregation of Jewish people, some of whom had come to Christ. And he is writing this letter to them. So you had then first of all some saved Jews. Some Jewish Christians. Some people who had really given their hearts to Jesus Christ. But, they began to experience some tremendous pressure from their Jewish relations; from their friends and their family and the whole thing began to pounce in on them and they were really starting to waver, even though they were saved, and they were beginning to go back to the old customs, keep some of the old feasts, make some of the old sacrifices, hang around some of the old priests, go back to the old temple standards, and they were beginning to fall back into Judaistic patterns to try to get some social acceptance even though they were saved. So the book is really written to these Jewish Christians, primarily, to tell them not to fall back into those old patterns of Jewishness, but to take their stand for Christ. And that's the major thesis of the book. He says you have a better covenant. You have a better priest, from a better priesthood, with a better sacrifice, which constitutes a better offering with better results and all that, than the old. And that's basically the thrust of the whole book. So that's the first reader.

But there's a second group of Jews who are intellectually convinced that the gospel is true. They are intellectually in their minds convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, but they have never received Christ because they're still hanging on the fence here. They're afraid to go over because they are afraid of what they see happening to the ones who did, you see? - of being alienated from their society, ostracized from their Jewish heritage, turned into outcasts and traitors and whatever else. And so they are hesitant to make the commitment. So periodically, dotting the book like exclamation points throughout Hebrews, are warnings to those sitting on the fence. And he'll say "Come on. Don't fall back. Don't turn your back on Christ. You know this is true. Come all the way to the promises. Come all the way to perfection in Christ." And very frequently, when he does that, the term "let us" is used in Hebrew. So the idea of "let us" is a call to the second category of Jewish people who are intellectually convinced the gospel is true but won't make that commitment for some personal reason.

And then, of course, the third element of readers would be the plain, old antagonistic Jews who aren't convinced and who aren't saved either.

Now, first of all, primarily, I would just say this: "let us" has reference to group two. He is calling on those Jews intellectually convinced and saying, "Look, you must come to Christ. Get in the race. The Christian life is a race and you've got to be in it. You've got to be on the track, participating, come on! Get in the race."

And secondarily, he's saying to Christians, "If you're in the race, would you please run it?" Because there are a lot of Christians just flopped all over the track and we'd like to get them going. So you

have a primary indication and a secondary. Primarily, he is inviting people to make a commitment to Christ. And you know it's very easy, I think, to sit on that fence. There are people who come to Grace Church, I know, who come and they sit and they listen. They hear the Word of God. They probably are intellectually convinced that it is true. They probably have even gone so far as to have some of their doubts removed in reading certain things to defend Christianity. Perhaps they have counseled with people, talked with their friends and so forth, and they really know it's true, but for some reason, they won't get in the race. And maybe it's because they're afraid of the peer pressure that's going to come from their family. Maybe some of them are even Jewish and they're afraid of the ostracizing that occurs. Maybe some of them are afraid they're going to lose their friends. Maybe some of them are afraid they're going to have to give up the girl they're living with. Some of them are afraid of the moral consequences or some of them realize if they do that they've got to clean up their act down at the business. And for whatever reason, they're sitting on the fence. And the word of the Holy Spirit, to them, then and now, today, this morning is "Hey, get in the race!" Get in the race. And he'll show you the reason why in a minute as we go. But the first thing is, the event is a race, and the only people in it are Christians, and so he's saying, get in the race. And to the Christian he's saying, when you get in it, would you mind running it with some endurance?

The race is the Christian life. You know, the Christian life is a race. It's not just sitting in some great, sanctified pillow waiting for the Rapture. That isn't the point. We are called to run a race. Now, you'll notice the word race in verse 1: "let us run the race" - is the word in the Greek agōn from which we get - guess what? - agony! That's the Christian life. Join the agony! How would you like that for a bumper sticker? You want real agony? Try Jesus. Get in the agony! You say, "wait a minute, you're not going to sell anybody." Well, the word agōn doesn't refer to a sprint. There are plenty of 100-yard dash Christians. And then they flop, you see. And then they pant for awhile and then they get up, go to a Bill Gothert's seminar and they go again. They get done with that, they hear a great sermon and then they go again. They just _____ all over the place. It's not the kind of race he's talking about. This is a marathon and that's what he's saying. And he's saying we have to run this marathon with hupomōnē in the Greek which means endurance. This is an endurance race. This isn't a short spurt. The Christian life is a commitment to run with endurance to victory. It demands discipline, it demands a certain kind of rigid care, it demands a self-sacrifice, a self-denial. It demands all these things but it is nothing like a passive luxury.

I was sharing with some of the pastors back at Moody this week that there's a mentality in Christianity today that wants to make Christianity sort of like a really, just some kind of a happy-go-lucky gig. You know, you're a Christian, so you just kind of flake away, see? And then you hear, "Well, if the Lord wants me, I'm available." You're available, well how nice. "The Lord just hasn't shown me anything. I'm certainly available." That's not the Christian life. We're not to ride around on flowery beds of ease. There's a strenuous self-sacrifice that demands hard training and discipline. This is true of the minister. I was sharing with the pastors this week that in 2 Timothy chapter 2 it says you have to endure hardness as the good soldier. It isn't easy to be a Christian. It is the life of a soldier. Paul

comes to the end and says "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race." Then there must be a sense of commitment. The Christian - it isn't any different for me. You say, "well you're a mature Christian, you know the Bible and the Christian life must be just roses for you." Yes, it can. All the same temptations - you think I get up every morning and say, "Oh, I get to study the Bible again today. I get to go to work and I can parse verbs for the next two hours. Do my Greek study." Do you think that's a great joy every day? It's a discipline. It's like anything else. It's a discipline. And because I desire to please God, most of the time, more than myself, although there are times when I don't, but because that's my greatest desire, I've learned to discipline myself to get to the goal that I set for myself and that is to do that which pleases Him. But it's a discipline. In fact, Amos said in Amos 6:1 "Woe unto them who are at ease." It's not a good place to be. There ought to be an aggressiveness to the Christian life. There ought to be a competitiveness to the Christian life insofar as you fight against weakness and indolence and laziness and ignorance and sin. So be what God wants you to be. Get in this thing. First of all, come to Christ. Get over the fence. Get in the race and when you're in it, man, run it! Run it. We don't need a whole lot of flaky Christians lying around the track. It just muddies the water and confuses the issue.

You say, "Well, how long is the race going to last?" Well it lasts until you die. Paul says, "I've finished my race and I'm ready to be offered." Notice the word "patience" there in verse 1. It's the word as I said that means endurance. It's a long race. You know that's a whole different thing. That takes much more training.

You know in high school I was basically a baseball player in the spring season, but I could run fairly fast so whenever they had a track meet, they'd always come and get me and take me to the track meet just to run the 100-yard dash. And I never trained for it. I just would go with the track team whenever they had a meet if we didn't have a baseball game and they'd just stick me out there and I'd run. And so that was great. I didn't mind that. You'd run 100 yards and it was over with. Now, once in awhile, I did well enough so that I enjoyed it. But baseball was my first love. But one day, we got out there and the guy who was supposed to run the 440 got sick. And so they said, "OK, MacArthur, you run the 440." I had never run a 440 in my life. I was in the tenth grade. And I only knew one way to run - fast as you can run. See? So I didn't have any idea about pacing. So they put me down there and we were down in some big high school in L.A. running this big thing. I think it was a triangular meet or four schools or something. And I got down in the box and man, when that gun went off, I was out of there. And by the time we hit the first turn, I was fifteen yards ahead. And I said, "This is a snap." You know, the people in the crowd, in the stands were thinking, "What is this? This guy's a tenth grade Olympic material. You know, this is fantastic. Look at this guy!" I'm out by fifteen, twenty yards coming around the first turn. I went down the back stretch feeling great, just great. And about halfway down the back stretch, something started to be funny with my legs, you know. I started getting these funny little twinges in my legs and by the time I got into the next curve, I had no feeling in my legs at all! And I was trying to get one leg in front of the other. They were wobbling and the track was going like this and I was getting a headache. And you know I'd never

forget it because I went down that last straightaway and I'm telling you it seemed like eternity trying to get to that tape. And as I got about near to that tape, one guy went by "whoosh!" and another guy went by "whoosh!" on the other side, and I just fell over the tape and I think I got third place and I was out. Nobody told me it was different when you had to run like that. And I think in the Christian life there are plenty of people who go "whoosh" "whoosh" over here and there, but you know it's carrying the thing from the start to the finish with consistency that brings all of the victories. And that's what God is after in the Christian life.

You see, Paul says to the Ephesians that "having done all, to" what? "Stand." He doesn't want everybody dead, flopped out at the finish line. There's got to be endurance. And endurance takes discipline. You can't come out on Saturday and run a 440 like that. You've got to train for that and discipline yourself and teach yourself what sacrifice means. And that's the kind of thing that God wants of us: self-disciplined Christians who can run a race that demands endurance. Now in 1 Corinthians 9 I would call your attention to a passage we studied some months ago, verse 24: "Know you not that they who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? So run to win." Run to win. You know I just don't feel I see enough of that in Christianity. I get upset in my heart at Christians who don't want to win...who aren't in this to the best of their ability...to be the most excellent that they can be. You know, I challenge you, if you're a Sunday school teacher - be the most excellent teacher that you can be. If you're leading a Bible study - run that thing to win, you see? If you're a housewife - be the most excellent that you can be. If you have a job - give the most excellent work that you can give. That's the only way to live the Christian life.

Well, you know it's easy for us to float along, so easy. I fight that all the - I mean I'm just a mouth surrounded by a body. My mouth works better than anything else. And I can get up in front of an audience and pretty much just carry it, just with my mouth. And that is a temptation in me, and through the years, I have had to learn to discipline my mind so that when my mouth is open, something significant occurs. But that's the discipline of excellence that I demand of myself. I don't know where your gifts are individually or what it is that God has called you to do and where he's placed you, but I'll tell you one thing - do it to win it. There's no other way to run. There's no other way.

Every man, he says in verse 25, that strives to win is temperate. That means he doesn't have any indulgence; he never breaks the training rules. Boy, you look at an athlete and they are unbelievable, how they train. It's incredible how they work to attain what they want and they do what he says to get a corruptible crown, a laurel wreath on their head that fades and it's gone. But we are incorruptible; how much greater should be our commitment.

Sometimes, a pastor will say to me, "You mean you study the Bible every day four, five or six hours?" And I'll say, "Yes, he's unbelievable." And I'll say to him, "You know, there are plenty of athletes who do that four, five or six hours a day to attain what they want to attain and I think that the Kingdom of

God is infinitely more important. That's no big deal. I should give more." Because God is seeking excellence. And he says you have to be temperate; that is, you have to say no to some things. You've got to cut yourself off from the world and the flesh. It's like 2 Timothy 2 where he says endure hardness as a good soldier, and then he says, and the good soldier does not entangle himself with the affairs of this life. He can't. You know, like a guy going into the army has a few weeks to get stuff ready, and then, man, he's in the army, and that is all he is in the army. Nothing else. Because the army wants to win. And so it is that we must commit ourselves to excellence and to win.

Boy, it would be so great if Christians in the world had that kind of commitment, as Paul did, to be excellent: to strive to master his body; to strive to master his mind; to strive to master his gifts - in order that when he worked for God, it was with excellence. And he was victorious. So the event is a race and a race means somebody's going to win. God wants every believer to win. If you're not a Christian, get in the race. If you are, run to win.

Second, back in Hebrews 12. First is the event. Second is the encouragement. I love this: the encouragement. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses." Now, when I was a little kid I remember hearing somebody tell about this. And they said, "Now you know, up in heaven, all the Old Testament saints are watching you. It's just like being in a big stadium, like the Coliseum, and you're down there running your little race and they're all sitting up there. Watching. The cloud of witnesses around us." The more I began to study the Bible, the more ridiculous that became. People who've gone to heaven aren't interested in looking at me. They're interested in fixing their gaze on the wonders of heaven. And that isn't even what the text is saying. What it's saying here is, "Here is the encouragement to run." What is it? "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses." What does that mean? People who have testified that running the race is great. Let me show you what I mean by that. You see the "wherefore?" What's the "wherefore" there for? The "wherefore" is there to take you backwards, isn't it? Now what do you have in Chapter 11? You have a whole list of people who live by what? Faith. Man, look at it. Back to verse 4. By faith, Abel. Verse 5: by faith, Enoch. Verse 7: by faith, Noah. Verse 8: by faith, Abraham. Verse 20: by faith, Isaac. Verse 21: by faith, Jacob. Verse 22: by faith, Joseph. Verse 23: by faith, Moses. Verse 30: by faith, the walls of Jericho fell down; the faith of Joshua. By faith, verse 31, the harlot, Rahab. And then you have in 32, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith! Now look! Here are the witnesses and what are they saying? They're saying this: "The life of faith is the life that wins. We ran it right through the hot spots. Right through the lion's dens; right through the swords; right through the wars; right through the persecution; right through crisis after crisis after crisis and it's the life of faith that wins. And we are living witnesses to the fact that you can run the race with endurance and know that God will honor you in the end." See, that's the point. They ran the race and they witnessed the victory. All that nethalay, that mass, that cloud say to us, "Live the life. Run the race of faith." Listen, 12:1 and 2 is simply the continuation of Chapter 11. It is the exhortation based on everybody else's life of faith. On the basis of how they ran by faith in God; on the basis that they put their faith in God,

believed God and went right through the crisis to victory, so should you run the race on the basis of the testimony of those witnesses.

Look at them. One after another, he says. Abel: right through the crisis of the hatred that came from his own brother. Noah: the crisis of the generation of people who laughed and mocked and scorned everything he did. Abraham: the crisis of being promised a nation and didn't have a son. Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and all the rest: crisis after crisis: look at them. Verse 34: they quenched the violence of fire, they escaped the edge of the sword. Verse 36: trials of cruel mocking and scourging, bonds, imprisonment, they were stoned, they were sawn in half, tested, slain with the sword and on and on and on. These are people who went through crisis after crisis after crisis and they stand up and say the life of faith is still the only way to go. See, they put their trust in God and God came through, right? So the writer is saying to the Hebrew people, he's saying, "If you haven't put your faith in Jesus Christ and you're hanging on the fence and you've got some reason you're not doing it, let me tell you about a history of people who did it and they went right through crisis with a sense of grave victory". What's he saying is, "You can put your trust in God and he'll come through. And Chapter 11 is living proof."

You know, there are times in my own life, and I know you go through these too when you feel weak, right? You feel lonely and you feel frail and you feel sinful and you feel like a failure and like a pilgrim and a stranger in the earth. And boy when you get into those times, how refreshing it is to go backwards and say, "Hey, I may have my doubts and I may feel my weaknesses, but let me reiterate the people who ran the race with patience and endurance and didn't give up and kept at it and ran through crisis after crisis after crisis and God honored and gave them victory." And that encourages my heart. That's what he's saying. God of yesterday is the God of today. Jesus Christ is the same, what? Yesterday, today and forever. That's over in the 13th chapter in the 8th verse. So you see, this is encouragement. Get out there and run. You're not the first guy. Plenty others. So the event and the encouragement.

Thirdly, the encumbrance. "Lay aside every weight and the sin that doth do easily beset us." One thing you learn when you run, you've got to run light, right? You can train with weights on your ankles and you can train in your sweatsuit, but when you get to the race, you probably ought to take it off. The word "lay aside every weight" simply means mass or bulk. Get rid of the bulk! I remember when Russian sprinter Bortzoff came to America after winning the Olympic gold medal some years ago, he entered several track meets and he kept losing. Somebody interviewed and I forget exactly what it was, but he made the comment, "The reason I'm losing is because," I think this was the correct number, it was close anyway, he says "I'm about three pounds overweight." You know, if most of us were three pounds overweight, that would be cause for great celebration. You know? Three pounds overweight?! Wow! But you see for somebody whose whole life is geared around being the fastest man in the world, three pounds is three pounds too much. And he forfeited his excellence because he didn't lay aside that weight.

A runner starts with a reduction of body excess and he comes to a perfect balance of power and lightness. And he trains to keep that equilibrium and he can run to win only in that sense. And when the race begins, he gets rid of the bulk. He strips off his sweats. You ever seen what runners run in? Those little, tiny, very flimsy pants. I mean really flimsy little things. They're, you know the kind, like your neighbor has on at 5:30 when he goes to get the paper. No encumbrance at all. He is down to bare minimum, see? So in the race of faith, you've got to strip off anything that's going to hold you back. You say, "What would it be, John? What would that mass of that bulk be there in verse 1?" Well, some say it might be materialism and I agree that will weigh you down, and some say it might be sexual immorality and I agree that might do it, and some people say it might be ambition and that'll do it, too, and so forth and so on, but I'll tell you what I really think he probably has in mind here. What was the biggest weight that encumbered a Jew from coming to Christ? It was legalism. Dead works. Pounds and pounds and pounds of legalistic bulk was all over those Jewish people. He would say, get in the race and run and they were trying to run with all legalism, ceremonies and rituals and rites and all these rules that they had kept from their old Judaism. And he says, "Junk it all and get in there and run the faith race; living by faith, not by works."

There a lot of Christians who live by works, you know. They think they have to do this; they have to do that; God is going to say, oh that's wonderful, you did this, you went to Bible study, you read the Bible, you go to church, you do all as if God is racking up on his little computer little numbers for every little good deed we do. That isn't it. I heard a man say this week, he said: "You have to have your morning devotions." Remember that? And that's good. "You have to have them in the morning!" Boy, I'm telling you, he was _____, "the morning!" And he went through Hosea and Isaiah, met God in the morning. Turned God and he talked with God in the morning. And Jesus rose in the morning. "You've got to have your devotions in the morning." And we were sitting there going through our Bible and it was saying, "And Isaiah spoke to God in the evening." And "Jeremiah met with God in the evening." And "Jesus went into the Mount of Olives in the evening and spoke with the Father." And you know what we decided? It's also in the evening! It's in the morning and it's in the evening. And God isn't up there saying, "If you have your morning devotions, you're going to be a good Christian." See, but there are a lot of Christians who think that. You know, they do the works, see? Subscribe to the Daily Bread, go to church every Sunday, don't kick dogs, be kind to your neighbor. Those are good things, you know that? Morning devotions are good things. But see, you can't count on that stuff. That won't save you. And that will not secure your spirituality. Not by those dead works. If those things are done in the overflow of your love for Jesus Christ as an act of devotion in faith that He'll honor your love, beautiful. But you see, there's so many people depending on their - it's not Jewish legalism - it's Christian legalism.

We're talking to one fellow who was telling me about a church where if anybody had their hair over their ears, they couldn't come in. What kind of church is that? Only for people with a certain kind of haircut. First Crewcut Church of Whatever. Those aren't God's standards. Those aren't God's

standards at all. No, we don't want to replace God's truth with manmade rules, like Jesus said in Matthew 15. You've substituted the manmade rules for the truth of God. And so, he is saying, get in the race and when you're in the race it's a race of faith. Get rid of all that stuff: those dead works; those things that you do in your flesh to try to earn God's favor.

And then he adds this. "And the sin" -- that's singular - "the sin that so easily besets us." The sin, what sin? A sin, a singular sin. What is the one sin that has the greatest effect on faith? Starts with a D. Doubt. That's right. The sin that messes up the life of faith is doubt. You say, "Oh God, you can supply all my needs" and every time something doesn't go the way it should, you get nervous. And you're really doubting, aren't you? You're really doubting.

You see, that's why the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 6, "take the shield of faith with which you should be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one." Those shields were 4 ½ feet by 2 ½ feet. Big shield. Thurean the Greek. It was covered in thick leather and the leather was soaked in oil. And they'd get those shields and the arrows, the flaming arrows would come and they'd sink into that leather and they'd be extinguished. And the shield of the Christian is faith. Satan fires his temptations and fires his temptations and you just catch them all in the shield of faith. You just say, "Satan, you're a big liar; nothing you say is true. Everything God says is true and I'm going to believe God." That's simple as - you'll never sin if you believe God. God's over here saying, "You do this, you'll be blessed, you do this, you'll be happy, you do this, you'll be fulfilled, you do this, I'll reward you, you do this, and every good thing will come your way," and after all that sounds pretty good, that's what you wanted anyway, and Satan's saying, "Do this, you'll enjoy it, do this, it's terrific, do this, you'll have fun," and every time you do what Satan says, you have believed who? You've believed him. Who did he believe? He believed Satan.

Satan came to Jesus and who did Jesus believe? He believed God and he was without sin. You see, every sin is an act of unbelief. You have actually fallen prey to the fact that you think Satan is right; you're going to get something out of it. The fact of that matter is, you're not going to get anything out of it - but trouble. So the one sin that besets the race of faith is doubt and unbelief - where you believe the adversary rather than God. So he says, "Junk your legalism, junk your doubt and run this thing with the confidence that will be given to you by an understanding of the great cloud of witnesses who lived the same life, ran the same race with triumph."

Then after the event, the encouragement and the encumbrances, and I love this best of all - is the example. Verse 2: "looking unto" whom? "Jesus, the author and finisher of faith." Stop right there. "Looking unto Jesus." Who do you look to? Who do you watch? Jesus Christ. When you run the race, keep your eyes on Christ. The obstructions are thrown away, the weights are thrown off, the race is under way, we have the encouragement of all those who ran the race in the past and went right on through trial and crisis after crisis and there we are running this race and we're looking at a perfect example of faith and that's Jesus Christ.

Listen, he is the greatest example of faith that ever lived. Paul says, "He thought not of something to hold onto to be equal to God, but made Himself of no reputation; took upon Himself the form of man, being found in _____, He humbled Himself, became obedient to death, even the death of the cross." You know what He did? He became a servant and He believed God, who said I will not let My Holy One see corruption. And He came into the world and He died on the cross knowing full well that even though He bore the sins of the world, He would come out of the grave to be the redeemer and be restored to the place that he had with the father before the world began. He believed the Father and His act of faith is unsurpassed. God became man and bore sin and died in the confidence that He would be raised by the Father and exalted again and He was and it was the greatest act of faith ever, because He had the most to lose. And he says, "If you need a model of faith, look at Jesus. He went through an incredible crisis. And believing God, He was victorious."

You know you have to look at some - I remember when I was a kid learning sports, my dad used to teach me just about everything. When I was little, he used to say when he was trying to teach me how to hit a baseball, he'd say, "You can't hit the baseball unless you keep your eye on the ball." And then when we used to play basketball, he'd say, "You can't make the basket unless you keep your eye on the basket." And then later on when I was about ten years old, he wanted to teach me how to play golf, and that's a hard game. Looks really easy, but it's a very hard game. "Because you always want to watch the shot and as soon as you start watching the shot, you don't hit the ball," so he'd say to me. For years he said to me, "You've got to watch the ball."

And you know, the same thing's true of - your eyes are the focal point of everything. For example, when you drive a car, when you drive your car you cannot watch your hood. Not and prevent an accident. Basically speaking, your eyes constantly focus on a point a couple of hundred of feet in front of the car. You don't watch the car. You don't watch the steering wheel. Lord help us, you don't watch the pedals. You watch a focal point far beyond yourself and the Greek term literally here says, "look away to Jesus." Look away to Jesus. The sooner you get your eyes off yourself, the better off you are. You don't need to be - and that's one of the reasons I react against all this constant, constant discussion about Christians and their problems and their psychology and their self-analysis and always introspection and always analyzing our spiritual life and so forth and so on; we get so wrapped up in watching it ourselves, it's like a guy trying to drive a car watching the pedals - going to run right into something. The sooner you get your eyes off yourself and get them focused on Jesus Christ, the better off you're going to be. It's like running a race. Running in a race, you do not watch your feet. Not unless you want to land on your nose. And so it is that we're to look to Jesus. Why? - because He's the perfect pattern. He's the perfect model. He's the perfect example. You don't even look at the other runners. Peter says in John 21, "Well, Lord what about John?" And what did Jesus say to him? "None of your business. You follow me."

You remember the race between Landy and Bannister where Landy turned around to look and all of a sudden, it was over. Bannister, I guess, turned around to look and Landy went right by him. He looked the wrong way. You don't need to be looking at anything but Jesus Christ. He is the archegos, he is the originator, he is the pioneer, he is the leader, he is the primogenitur, he is the supreme, that is what that word means. He is the greatest, the beginner of faith and he is the teleon, he is the end of it all, and everything in between, he's the model of faith. His incarnation was the greatest demonstration of faith in the history of the world and He went through a crisis unmatched by any other. So, He even said, in his life, "I've come not to do my will but the will of Him that sent me."

And so the event, the encouragement, the encumbrances and the example. Let me tell you about the end. The end. What's at the tape? What do we get if we win? The end? Look at verse 2. 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. What are you running for? Two things: joy and to set down at the right hand of God meant triumph. Joy and triumph. One is subjective, one is objective. One is that great, exhilarating feeling that you have won and the other is the actual reward of God that is given to you for your triumph. An athlete knows that there is nothing equal to the thrill of winning. It's something inside and it isn't the medal, or the trophy or whatever else. It's just the winning; the exhilaration of victory; and that's what he's saying. There is the joy of victory as well as the reward of God, and in the case of Christ, the reward was he was seated at the right hand. In the case of those of us, there are five crowns that our Lord has promised, aren't there? They can be our's. I don't know about you, but if He's offering them, I want to win them for His glory. And so there are two sides: the end of the race, joy and triumph.

And you know, I don't even think that's even necessarily just future. It is set before Christ insofar as it's the end of the - it's after the cross. It's after the crisis. And I'm sure ultimately for us, the same thing is true. That the real joy and the real reward is in heaven with Christ when he comes with reward but even here and now, don't you experience as a Christian a tremendous sense of joy and a tremendous sense of triumph when you win the victory over temptation? Boy, I know I do. And it's just like getting a little taste of what the ultimate joy and the ultimate victory is going to be.

Well, lastly, he says "I've given you the event, the encouragement, the encumbrances, the example, the end, now here is the exhortation." I'll close with it. Having presented this powerful appeal to the race, to get in the race and run it, he knows that there are going to be some people that are going to say this, "Well, you know, it's not easy being a Christian. I am abused at the water cooler. They short me on the paper clips. It's not easy, the philosophy professor, he really attacks us who are Christians. Really running - you don't know what's going on in my home, it's really difficult. My husband is very, very opposing. And you know it's not easy in our society to really run to win; to really be bold; to really wear the uniform, you know it's very very difficult. You know, we are getting close to the end times." I like this answer. Verse 3: for consider Him, who would that be? Christ. That endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself lest you be wearied and faint in your

minds, you have not yet resisted unto blood striving against sin. He says, "I don't see any of you bleeding. It may be a little rough at the water cooler; you may get hassled in the philosophy class but you haven't crucified yet and I know one who has." You see where his exhortation comes from? When you start feeling like it's too tough to live the Christian life, consider the one who endured such a contradiction of sinners against himself, who went even to blood and to death, and to realize you haven't gone that far yet.

You don't have it so tough. You're no Savannah Rolla burned at the stake. You're no great patriarch beheaded for Christ. You're no early church father put in a skin of a sheep and thrown to a lion. You don't have it so tough. You're not like those people hiding in mountains and dens and caves. You haven't been sawed in half like Isaiah. You haven't been put in the lion's den like Daniel. You haven't had your eyes plucked out like Samson. When you start getting weary and you start getting faint in your mind, you consider Jesus Christ who endured such contradiction of sinners. And if the life of His faith was His life of triumph and victory, it can be your's too, because you don't even have to carry it that far. So I say to you, if you're not in the race, come on. Get in the race. There's a crown out there for you. Joy and triumph. And Christian, if you're in it, run it with all you've got. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for helping us again this morning to search our own hearts and be exhorted, for that's really what we have done this morning is be exhorted again to commit ourselves to run the race. With discipline and dedication, great energy, excellence, for You are worthy of only the best from us. We pray for any who are not in the race, who've never yet given their heart to Jesus Christ. We pray that this might be that great day, that glorious moment where they put on the uniform of Jesus Christ and step on the track and take their place. Help us to realize we're not competing with any other Christian. Every one of us runs the race only for our own selves and God is looking for the maximum effort from us not in relation to anybody. Just that total commitment on our part. And so we pray that You would bring to Yourself today those who need to get into the race and that You'll help the rest of us to really run it. And to believe You. To really believe You for everything. To function by faith like those great people in the past. To know the joy and the triumph that you have for us. And we praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.

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