

# ***Run the Race***

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Imagine witnessing the Marathon at the Commonwealth Games. Runners are lined up, stripped to the bare essentials. All is ready for the race when suddenly we see another fellow coming to the starting line. But strange as it seems he is fully dressed. He has on a full suit, heavy overcoat, hip boots and a heavy woollen cap. In his hands he carries his lunch bucket and an umbrella. His pockets are filled with medicines. Everyone is surprised that such a person would try to win the race.

Finally, we approach him and ask him about it. "Of course," he says, "I'm running the race. What's wrong with what I wear? Is anything wrong with a coat or cap or medicines? After all, the race is long, the terrain is treacherous, and I may become ill. I'm going prepared for whatever may lie ahead." We can't tell him that what he carries is a burden. But we know he'll never win the race. Why? Because he is loaded with weights.

Our second reading for today pictures Christianity as an "Athletic Event". It tells us to run the race. And, as with the Commonwealth Games, we are all being urged to run to win.

### **The Spectators**

In telling us to run the race, the author of Hebrews raises the image of a stadium. We are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. This arena of our life has seats filled with spectators, the Old Testament heroes of faith that we read about in Hebrews 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and the prophets. They are veteran athletes who have already run the race. Their message is, to run the Christian race and live the Christian life "by faith." They urge us to keep running, to clear all the hurdles, to jump all the puddles, "by faith" whether problems, worries, sickness, tension, death, unemployment, brokenness, etc..

These should be a source of great encouragement as we try, by faith, to run the race, to live the Christian life for they have already run the race. By faith they ran the race against seemingly impossible odds and yet they crossed the finish line. They urge us to imitate them: to run, to live, by faith.

These heavenly spectators are looking for believers who are running the race: straight and true and hard for the finish line. People who try to grow and mature in the Christian faith and godliness, people who by God's grace become more and more like Christ. What disappoints are believers whose Christian life is at a stand-still, or have given up, or chase other things.

### **The Race**

Think of the man at the Marathon again. You don't see athletes trying to run in a tight dress or in a bulky winter coat. You don't see athletes trying to run with kilo's on their shoulders. You don't see sluggish, over-weight, out-of-condition people running. Hebrews uses the image of the conditioned, properly dressed athlete when it tells us to run the race. It says, "let us throw off everything that hinders." God's athletes must lay aside a preoccupation with worldly cares and goods. It is hard to run, when your arms are filled

with treasures and your heart divided by desires. It is hard to grow and develop in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, when career, money, recreation, sex, sports, or family are more important than the Lord. Whatever hinders or prevents us, from running the race must be "thrown off." Jesus says, "Seek first his kingdom ...

A large eagle was shot by a hunter. When he examined the bird, he was amazed to find that one of its claws was held firmly in a strong steel trap from which dangled a 5-foot chain. Although not heavy enough to prevent the creature from flying, the additional weight had wearied the eagle and brought it down within reach of his rifle.

What happened to the eagle happens to Christians when they do not throw off everything that hinders them – they are brought low and become weary of the calling the Lord has given them.

Sin is the biggest hindrance to God's athletes as they run the race. Sin to the Christian is the same as alcohol, tobacco, and too much food to the athlete: it impedes and makes one out-of-condition, and over-weight. Sin is like a high wall. It is hard, if not impossible, to run a race when there is a high wall in the way.

You and I must get rid of sin in our life for sin keeps us from running the race. Says Hebrews, "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." This isn't easy, of course. But you know what the athlete is told: "no pain, no gain." In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus urges radical surgery in order to remove sin: If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. ... In other words, you and I are to fight and resist sin with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Like the athlete, to run the race, to live the Christian life, we must go into training. We are to get into condition. The athlete does this by regularly lifting weights, jumping rope, running sprints, and so on. The Christian does this through the reading and studying of God's Word, through prayer, through faithful church attendance, through participation in the life of the church.

We must also run with perseverance. "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us," says Hebrews. We can't quit half way through. We have to keep on running until the goal is reached. We have to keep on plugging and struggling and may never quit until we are called from this life:

### **The Finish Line**

Faith constantly looks to the finish line and never loses sight of the future. The finish line is Christ and the glory of life with Him.

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. What a wonderful definition of piety - Looking to Jesus. Have you ever paused to think about the meaning of this phrase? The Old Testament saints ran the race, they endured all sorts of pains and agonies, and they conquered kingdoms, because they were keeping their eye on Jesus.

It seems that we have inherited a faith that struggles with the primacy of Jesus. Rather than engage God in human form we seek other distractions to avoid this confrontation. We hide behind doctrine; or tradition; or liturgy; or practice; or programme; in order to avoid coming to terms with Jesus. We are uncomfortable with his presence and like Peter say to him, "Get away from me for I am a sinful man".

Rather than confront this sin, we put fences around Jesus and call him the Word and

worship Scripture, or the real presence and worship bread and wine, or we seek substitutes that are less challenging. We will raise some Christian leader or author on a pedestal and make their word - gospel for it easy to emulate another human being, even the Godly ones, than to come face to face with Jesus.

Step back for a moment and look at the church that we are part of. We stand up for our rights, we seek to destroy those who wrong us, we use our positions of power to get our own way, we condemn the sinner, we fail to defend the poor and the powerless, the widows and the fatherless. The condemnations seem endless and yet we pretend to act in Christ's name. We stand condemned by our actions alongside the people of Isaiah's day who worshiped God with their lips but their hearts were far from him.

Why not commit yourself to a time of reflection on the life of Jesus and his death? Take time to focus on him alone, that your faith may be made perfect in him. Ask God to take you step by step and highlight the areas in which your life is divergent from Jesus. Read the Sermon on the Mount and reflect on its impact on your life, or put your name in place of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Do not be satisfied with the standards of others but have the courage to put yourself beside Jesus on the Cross.

This is scary stuff, for we can begin to feel inadequate through this process, but the promise is there also: that God will bring us to perfection through our weaknesses. Only when we become vulnerable, can God make us his instruments to change our environments for Jesus. Only when the world can see Jesus in us can we make a difference for him. It all comes down to a matter of trust. What are the things that you are putting your faith in that replace your trust in Jesus? Let us seek to rid ourselves of these Obstacles to Grace, that we might look only to Jesus. Can we afford to be satisfied with less?

## **Conclusion**

Listen again to the beautiful but challenging words of our text from Hebrews:

*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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus ...*

I urge you, my brothers and sisters, to listen to the great cloud of witnesses. I urge you to run the race, to live the Christian life, to seek first the kingdom and its righteousness. I urge to run, to live, by faith. I urge you to throw off sin and everything that hinders. I urge you to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

And then you and I will be able to say with the Apostle Paul,

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness ...*

**AMEN**