

Our Spiritual Race

Reading: Hebrews 12:1-3 “.....let us run with endurance the racebefore us.”

Introduction:

We read in **Luke 9:62** that; “...No one, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God...”¹. The context of this verse is a passage dealing with the cost of discipleship (**Luke 9:57-62**). Someone had come to Jesus and said that they would follow Him where ever He went. Jesus pointed out to him that He had nowhere to “...lay His head.”, i.e. Jesus had no home, no possessions.

Another person accepted Jesus’ invitation to follow Him, but first wanted to go and bury his father. Still another wanted to bid his household farewell first. Jesus then makes His statement in verse **62**.

It seems that Jesus was telling these people that, in order to follow Him, they would have to make some sacrifices; they would have to re-prioritise things in their life, resulting in some of their earthly matters being put to one side.

In another passage, Jesus says that; “*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.*” (**Mark 8:34**).

When you consider these passages, we start to see that following Jesus isn’t going to guarantee a life of ease. Yes, through Jesus, we have peace (**Romans 1:7b**), joy (**1 Peter 1:8**), comfort (**1 Corinthians 14:3**) and rest (**Matthew 11:28**). But I would suggest that these things refer primarily to our spiritual life, rather than the physical (**Matthew 11:29; 2 Corinthians 4:16**).

– however, there can also be some physical benefits from righteous living (**Psalm 34:12-19; Proverbs 3:1-2**).

The reason for the challenges we face as Christians is because the way of the Lord and the way of the world are not the same thing – in fact, they are opposed to each other (**Romans 8:5-8**). We are engaged in a battle, not a physical battle, but a spiritual battle (**Ephesians 6:12**). It is a life-long battle, and won’t end for us until our time here has ended (**Revelation 2:10b**). There can be times when we feel discouraged (**1 Kings 19:4; 2 Corinthians 1:8**), and start to wonder; “*Is it all really worth it?*”.

In this lesson, we will consider what help and encouragement we can get from the opening verses in **Hebrews 12**.

1) Others have run the same race before us (verse 1a)

On more than one occasion, the apostle Paul compared our Christian life to running a race (**1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 2:5**). Here in verse **1**, the Hebrew writer also uses the image of a race.

We are not the only ones to run this race. It was not unique to the 1st century, nor to the 21st century. It has been run by countless thousands before us, and will be run by others in the future (Lord willing).

¹ All Biblical quotes are from the New King James Version (NKJV) Bible

Our Spiritual Race

In **Hebrews 11**, the writer talks about those who have gone before –

- Noah (vs.7), a righteous man living in a society full of corruption (**Genesis 6:5-12**).
- Abraham (vs.8), trusting in the promises of God (**Hebrews 11:8-10**).
- Moses (vs.23), who gave up earthly power in Egypt in order to be with God's people (**Hebrews 11:24-27**).
- Others (vs.32-38) who had trials of mocking, were scourged, held captive in chains, stoned, killed with the sword, sawn in two. They endured these things that "...they might obtain a better resurrection" (**Hebrews 11:35**).

These are described as "*so great a cloud of witnesses*" in **Hebrews 12:1a**. They endured the hard times and the sacrifices. They "...fought the good fight, ...(they) have finished the race, and have kept the faith" (**2 Timothy 4:7**). When you read the accounts of these people in the scriptures, you see the sense of certainty and trust that they had in God and His promises (Noah - **Genesis 6:22**; Joseph – **Genesis 50:20**; David - **Psalms 7:1**; sons of Korah - **Psalms 46:1**).

These "witnesses" now surround us, and give testimony to the fact that, in spite of their own weaknesses, it is possible to remain faithful to the end, despite the hardships. They have run their race, and now stand as examples, exhorting and encouraging us onwards towards the finish line.

2) The preparation needed to run with endurance (verse 1b)

One of the things that we need to do in running this "race" is to remove any obstacle that will slow us down. When you look at marathon runners or cyclists in a race, you won't see them wearing bulky clothing that flaps in the breeze. They are usually dressed in lycra, or some other stream-lined clothing. Anything that slows them down is removed.

Often during their training sessions, athletes will run carrying weights to build up their strength. But when the actual race is on, the weights are laid aside so as not to slow them down.

So what can slow us down in our spiritual race? Sin, worry, half-hearted commitment, not wanting to let go of the world, religious error, bad attitudes (**Matthew 6:24**; **Mark 4:18-19**; **Galatians 3:1**; **5:19-21**). The illustration used here in **Hebrews 12:1** is of sin "entangling" us. To me, it conjures up a picture of trying to run through a forest where there are small shrubs, blackberry bushes and long grass all over the place getting tangled in our legs. We can't move as fast as we could do on the open field. We waste time untangling ourselves; we end up being "way behind" where we could be, and we can become frustrated and discouraged.

Sin does the same thing to our spiritual race, and this verse tells us that it is easy for sin to entangle us. Most of the time, it is easier for us to give into temptation and sin, than it is to fight the temptation and not sin. For example, someone does something to hurt you or offend you.

- what is your natural response?
- what is the easiest response?

Our Spiritual Race

Most of the time we want to strike back; we want to “get even”. But Jesus says, “...*love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you...*” (**Matthew 5:44**) While we try to get revenge, our spiritual growth is hindered, because our attention is diverted into trying to find ways to “get back” at the person. We become entangled in our desire for “pay back”, rather than moving ahead and growing in Christ-like qualities (**Matthew 5:48**).

We all have things in our lives that “hold us back” – bad habits, wrong attitudes, sinful practices, worldly desires.

- while-ever I have a short fuse with people, and respond with knee-jerk reactions, I am not growing in self control (**Galatians 5:23**).
- while-ever I use foul language, I am not growing in speech that “... *imparts grace to the hearers*” (**Ephesians 4:29**).

All these things are dead weights slowing us down. As we run our race, we need to be overcoming these obstacles and removing them from our lives (**Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:21-5:5**).

3) Focus on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (verse 2)

The word “*endurance*” was mentioned in verse 1. Our “race” is not a short sprint. Rather, it is a life-long marathon. “*Endurance*” implies that it will be a struggle at times, and it is important that we don’t lose our focus on the goal.

The athlete focuses on a goal – the finish line; the gold medal; the (perishable) crown (**1 Corinthians 9:25**). All other distractions are put aside so as to not divert attention.

The world has plenty to offer us in the way of distractions (**2 Timothy 4:10a; 1 John 2:16**), but we should not allow these things to divert us from the path we are to run. To keep us on track, **Hebrews 12:2** exhorts us to “*fix our eyes on Jesus...*”, *i.e.* we are to keep our eyes focussed on Him. He is the example we have for our lives (**1 Peter 2:21; 1 Corinthians 11:1**) – both in His life itself, and His teachings (**John 6:68**). His aim in life was to be pleasing to the Father (**John 8:29; Romans 15:3a**), and to do His Will completely (**John 5:30**). He resisted all temptations so as not to sin (**Hebrews 4:15**).

He had a much tougher race to run than we do – He suffered much more than we will ever face (**Isaiah 53:3-7; Hebrews 12:4**). But He endured, and remained faithful to the Father, “...*obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (**Philippians 2:8**).

But notice, too, that Jesus also had a goal – “...*for the joy that was set before Him...*” (**Hebrews 12:2**). What was this joy? I see two possibilities;

- a) “...*sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (**Hebrews 12:2b**). Having obeyed the Father in all things, “...*God...has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name*” (**Philippians 2:9**). Jesus now sits at the right hand of God.
- b) The salvation of sinners – the reconciliation of man with God (**Luke 19:10; Ephesians 1:3-10; Colossians 1:19-20; 1 John 4:9-10**).

Our Spiritual Race

This joy, this goal, helped Him to endure the shame, the ridicule, and the suffering that He went through on the cross (**Matthew 27:39-44**). The cross was usually reserved for the worst of criminals² (**Mark 15:27-28**), yet here was the innocent, sinless, Son of God, nailed to a cross for public display and humiliation. But He looked beyond the immediate hardships. His death was not a meaningless exercise. It had purpose – it was achieving the Will of God in bringing salvation to penitent sinners (**Hebrews 5:9**).

We too have a goal “set before us” – the crown of life (**Revelation 2:10b**), an eternal inheritance (**Ephesians 1:11**). We have the blessing of His forgiveness right now (**Ephesians 1:7; 1 John 1:7, 9**), but we also have an eternal home awaiting us at the end of time (**John 14:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:17**). Like Paul, we need to “...forget those things which are behind, and reach forward to those things which are ahead.... pressing on toward the goal....” (**Philippians 3:13-14**), eyes firmly fixed on Jesus.

4) Consider Him who suffered such hostility (verse 3)

The Christians who received the Hebrew letter were to “...consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself...”. And the reason? In case they “...become weary and discouraged...”

In “*considering Him*”, they were to compare the sufferings of Jesus with their own in order to learn how to remain steadfast in the face of shame and mockery. Some may say that it wasn’t all that hard for Jesus, because He was different – He was the Son of God. Yes, He was the Son of God, but He was also a man. Jesus had a physical body that knew hunger (**Matthew 4:2**), thirst (**John 4:7**), weariness (**John 4:6**), pain and agony (**Luke 22:44**). He also had feelings and emotions;

- He was not happy about how the money changers were abusing the Temple (**Mark 11:15-17**).
- He marvelled at the faith of the centurion (**Matthew 8:5-10**).
- He had compassion for the lost (**Mark 6:34**).
- He was grieved and angry at the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees (**Mark 3:1-6**).
- He loved His disciples (**John 19:26**).
- He lamented over Jerusalem’s refusal to follow their Lord (**Matthew 23:37**).
- He wept when He considered the future tragedy that awaited Jerusalem (**Luke 19:41-44**).

When they scourged Him (**Matthew 27:26**), put the crown of thorns on His head (**Mark 15:17**), and crucified Him (**Luke 23:33**), He would have felt the physical pain.

When they spat in His face, He would have felt the insult (**Matthew 26:67**).

When they mocked Him, He would have felt the hurt (**Matthew 27:27-31, 39-44**).

He endured all this, not because He was helpless (for He had twelve legions of angels available to rescue Him at any time – **Matthew 26:53**), but because of what it would accomplish.

² Truth for Today, November 2006, Hebrews 7, page 7

Our Spiritual Race

When we start to feel discouraged or disheartened, consider Jesus, and what He went through. He endured, knowing that the current trials would pass, and that glory awaited Him on the other side.

Conclusion:

The race we have before us is long, and full of trials. But it is a race we must run. Christianity is not something that you do for a while, and then look for something else. (What we can do physically may change with age or illness, but in those times, we simply make adjustments and continue to do what we can.) If we give up, to whom shall we go? Only Jesus has the Words of life (**John 6:68; 14:6**).

The Hebrew letter reminds us that many others have run this race. Many did not have the promises that we have (**Hebrews 11:39**), but they had a steadfast faith in God, and knew the certainty of better things ahead (**Hebrews 11:26-27**).

Therefore, let us lay aside anything that slows us down or distracts us, keep our eyes focussed on Jesus, and consider those who have run the race before us.