

Teaching

Running the Race

March 10, 2017

Question: "What does it mean to 'run the race set before us' (Hebrews 12:1)?"

Answer: "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" (Hebrews 12:1). What kind of race do believers run? Who sets the race parameters? Is it a race we define and purpose for ourselves? The passage in question draws from the rich imagery of the footraces of ancient Israel, Greece, and the amphitheaters of Rome. It was written to encourage and challenge believers to persevere in their faith, especially in the midst of trials and persecution (2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 10:36; 12:7).

Athletes in a race were surrounded by rows and rows of spectators, pictured for us as "a great cloud of witnesses." The "witnesses" of the believers' race are listed in the previous chapter of Hebrews: the men and women of God whose faithful lives were recorded in the Old Testament. These saints persevered despite unimaginable oppression and cruelty (Hebrews 11:33–38) and were commended for their faithfulness. Whether the saints of Hebrews 11 are actually watching us run our "race" today is doubtful; the point of the passage is that their testimony lives on. Their unyielding faith bears witness to the promises of Jesus Christ, urging us to follow their example and "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1).

The "race," then, is the Christian life. It's a marathon, not a sprint, and we are called to stay the course and remain faithful to the end. Paul used this same imagery near the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

The steadfastness of the Old Testament "witnesses" speaks to believers today of the rewards of staying in the race, of never giving up (1 Corinthians 9:24; Philippians 3:14). A marathon is a strenuous test of fitness and endurance. The race set before us requires faith, stamina, commitment, and discipline in order to live faithfully (1 Corinthians 9:25–26; Philippians 3:12–14; 1 Timothy 6:12).

The race is "set before us"; we did not select the course, for it is God who established it. This race we run for Christ. We stay the course in spite of trials and persecutions (Hebrews 12:4–11). As we run, we must "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). Because He perfectly finished His race, He is the focus of our lives. We look away from all distractions because He is already at the finish line (Lamentations 3:25; Matthew 6:33; Romans 2:7).

The race demands that we do away with "everything that hinders"—sin and whatever else threatens our relationship with God (Hebrews 12:1). Anything that will slow us down or trip up us must be cast off. The apostle Paul says "to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22–24). With the encouragement of those who have gone on before, we rid ourselves of thoughts, attitudes, and habits that impede our progress (Romans 12:2; Titus 3:3; 1 Peter 1:14).

Seeing that the race God set out for us is a lifelong marathon, we must commit ourselves to run to the very end. A daily regimen of prayer, worship, reading God's Word and examining our lives for impediments will help. We will persevere by maintaining a Christlike attitude even in the midst of trials (1 Peter 2:21; 4:1; 1 John 2:6).

No matter how long the race may be, we keep our eyes on Jesus, "the champion who initiates and perfects our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, NLT). There is joy awaiting. In the words of songwriters Twila and Starla Paris, "Runner, when the race is won, you will run into His arms."

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