

“Running the Race Together With Those Who Have Run Before Us”

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

This weekend in May is formally set aside to remember. It is this weekend that we, as a nation, officially remember the men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice while protecting our freedoms on the “field of battle” with those who would take those freedoms from us. We acknowledge that those men and women, as well as all who have served honorably with them, are protectors of our liberty – a liberty entrusted to us by those who envisioned it over 250 years ago. We also recognize that such a trust passed on from one generation to another creates a profound bond among those generations which enables the vision to endure as a reality enjoyed by future generations. To the degree that we fail to hear from and honor the generations before us and who have paid the price necessary to pass on the vision of our original benefactors in the substance of our freedoms, we will begin to denigrate rather than honor the inheritance we have been given as a trust.

The text before us is a call to a group of Christians who find themselves fading in the midst of a great struggle, which is pictured by the author as a grueling race or a brutally difficult contest. This is a call to persevere until the race is done and we all cross the line safely and victorious. The recipients of Hebrews are probably a group of Jews who have placed their faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah and are now facing significant opposition to that faith – perhaps at the hands of Jews demanding they abandon Jesus and return to Judaism.

Ultimately, he will call on them to persevere in the race “by faith.” It is a faith which characterizes the people of God down the generations. Though the fundamental exhortation is found in 12:1, the author has built to this point by the truths he has taught up to this point and the application he has made of those truths to the “race.” This accounts for the warnings given throughout the letter/sermon leading up to this exhortation – cf. 2:1-3; 3:12-14; 5:12-14; 6:1, 4-6, 11-12; 10:26-31, 35-36.

Key: At the heart of the author’s exhortation to his readers – to you and me – *is a call to remember. This call to remember is found in the author’s reference to the “great cloud of witnesses” which surround them/us. It is a call to consider those who have “run the race” before them* – those represented by the heroes of the faith cited in 11:1-40. Most importantly, they are to consider/remember Jesus – “the author and perfecter of their faith” (cf. From beginning to end this sermon calls its hearers to this majestic Jesus as their hope and their strength – “We see Jesus” - 2:9, “Consider Jesus” - 3:1, “Fix your eyes on Jesus” - 12:2, “Let us go out to Jesus” - 13:13).

Note: The author speaks of/pictures the Christian life as a great race – a contest – cf. 12:1 – When you and I cut to the heart of this passage we see that it consists in a primary exhortation –

“Let us *run the race* set before us, with perseverance...” Everything else either gives us perspective on the race, instructions as to how we should run well or motivation which compels us to *run!!*

The Author’s Perspective On The Christian Life Is That Of A Great, And Challenging Race – cf. 12:1; 11:1-2, 13-14, 39-40 – The author leads into this exhortation by presenting the readers with those who have come/”run” before them. These are people who are already “heroes of the faith” which was passed on to Israel. They are heroes of their spiritual/national heritage. They are the “great cloud of witnesses” which surround the readers and they set the context for understanding the life to which you and I are called and in which we are to persevere.

- Those who came before them ran the race – persevered in the “contest” – *by faith* – cf. 11:1-2. They serve as examples for those who follow after them.

- They *reached out by faith*, to promises they did not receive in this life – cf. 11:**13-16**, 25-27, 29-38, **39-40**; also Philippians 3:12-14. In 11:39 the word translated “commended” in the NIV is the word for “testify” or “witness” – the word from which we get martyr. It is used 8 times in Hebrews – 7:8, 17; 10:15; 11:2, 4 (2x), 5, 39. In four of the five uses in chapter 11 the verb is passive and speaks of individuals “being commended” for their lives of faith. In 11:4b it is active and God is the declared subject – “God *spoke well* of his offering.” In 11:39 the author speaks in general and summary language about all of those OT who lived by faith. They were “commended” for their lives of faith – lives which persevered in “the race” – *even though they did not receive the promise made under the Old Covenant which is the New Covenant - Jesus*.

Nevertheless, they kept their eyes up in the race, despite the most difficult and threatening circumstances – eyes set by faith on the promises and the One who promised (cf. Philippians 3:12-14). They provide examples of the faith, perspective, that perseveres in the most difficult stages of the race.

The Perspective Of The Christian Life As A Great And Challenging Race Provides Focus, Discipline, And Readiness – cf. 12:1; 2 Timothy 2:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-19. The lives of the OT saints, when seen as “running of race,” serves as examples of the focus, discipline and readiness of faith which allows us to run with perseverance in the most difficult times in the race/contest.

- The race run by the “witnesses” serves to call us to focus/preparation, discipline and the perseverance of faith necessary to run the race in such a way as to finish (cf. 12:1b; 2 Timothy 2:3-5; Ephesians 6:10-19).

1. The race requires a “by faith” and single minded focus (cf. 12:1b; also 11:13-16; 2 Timothy 2:3-5). They lived with their eyes set on the promises (cf. Moses 11:26-27; also **Philippians 3:12-14**).

2. This “by faith” single minded focus allows for the discipline and preparation necessary (cf. 12:1b; 2 Timothy 2:3-5; 4:6-8; Ephesians 6:10-19). The author identifies two general obstacles to the race of faith. The first is the “easily entangling sin.” This is obviously something which is wrong and which dulls or hardens our hearts to the Lord and the promises of unspeakable pleasure in Him (cf. **Philippians 3:7-14**; 2 Timothy 2:3-5; **4:1-5, 6-8**). The second obstacle is not blatant sin - rather it is what John calls “love of the world” – cf. 1 John 2:15-17. It is the excess weight that causes fatigue in the race. It is the chocolate chip cookie breakfast or the long hours sitting and watching TV or playing video games. It is the hours invested in our favorite hobby to the neglect of prayer and time in the Word. It is anything that creates greater appetites and love for this life than the life we are promised – politics, history, economics, etc.

- They are the “great cloud of witnesses” which “surround” us as we run the race – cf. 12:1a. The author is creating a picture of a great race – some say one taking place in a great stadium filled with spectators. Those spectators are the OT – Old Covenant – saints of Hebrews 11 who have run before us. They cheer us on as we run. What comes to mind for me is the Olympic marathon. The majority of the more than 26 miles is run on the road leading up to the stadium. The way is lined with spectators and with first aid and water stations. Imagine that everyone along the way is one who has run before us – they encourage us and provide us with the necessary care to continue the race....The runners finish the race in the stadium. There is a great crowd in the stadium excitedly waiting for the runners to enter. As the time approaches the “witnesses” begin to stand to get a glimpse of the first runners. As the lead runners enter they are exhausted and just trying to hang on. The cheers of the crowd begin to boil up and with them the runners seem to gain their strength....You can picture it. **But there is something even more profound about our relationship to these witnesses!!**

The Author Compels Us To Run By The Implication That The Race We Run Is A Relay Race Which Spans Redemptive History – cf. 11:39-40; 12:2-3

- The author implies that the race the OT/Old Covenant saints ran – that we are running – is a relay race that spans redemptive history – indeed all of time and eternity – to its completion. That means that though their individual leg of the relay is complete the race is not yet done (cf. 11:39-40). In addition, we are told that they were “commended for their faith” because they persevered though the promise was not in hand.

- Though they finished their race, the race itself was not complete and the ultimate reward – promise – would only be experienced when the last runner crossed the finish line. These “witnesses” line the course of the race and they fill the stadium - but also those who have come after them and have run the race (cf. 1 Peter 1:10-12). We are in that race now and all of those who have come before and have finished their leg of the race line the course and await our entrance into the stadium!!

However, though we are to remember them, they are not our focus (cf. 12:2-3)

- We are to look away to Jesus Who is “the author and perfecter of our faith” if we are to run well to the finish (cf. 12:2-3) – There are two things to note about these two verses.

1. Jesus is the author and perfecter of the faith/our faith. The translation “let us fix our eyes on Jesus” is an understandable attempt to smooth out the language of the passage. However, there is “something lost in the translation.” It reads from 12:1b-12:2a, “with perseverance, let us run the race set before us, by looking away to the author and perfecter of the/our faith – Jesus...” I know it seems a small point but there are clearly two emphases made in the original wording. It is by looking away from all else and looking to Jesus that we are able to endure. Second, Jesus as the author and perfecter brings all of the teaching of Hebrews to bear on this very passage. Jesus is the One who entered loving and powerfully into solidarity with humanity (cf. 2:5-10). He is the One with whom the race began!! He is the One who was the first to run and the first to finish. More than that – it is His running that enables us to run and guarantees our finish with Him – He came in to share in and conquer our fallen humanity so that we could share in His glory – the glory of the New Humanity. He snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat by crushing the enemy, sin, death and the curse. “He is both the first to complete the road to salvation, and the one who makes our following him possible.”¹

2. The race He ran is the race we must run (cf. 12:2b-3). There is a Greek verb used to describe our race as “the race *set before* us.” That verb is picked up in 12:2 to describe Jesus’ race. However, it is the “race set before” Him but “*the joy* set before Him.” Jesus’ race – the race which He has finished – is the “way of the cross” and suffering. Think in those terms for a moment. Who lined the road to Golgotha? When Jesus was finishing His race on that cross – who surrounded Him to bear witness. He endured from the manger, through the garden and the cross because of what awaited Him at the finish line. It is that joy set before Him which He saw through the cross by faith for which He ran the race - then ***He sat down!!***

It is Jesus along the way – in the crowd of witnesses – cheering, strengthening and encouraging us. It is Jesus who stands as the runners enter the stadium and it is His voice that is loudest and lifts us along. It is He who will sit on that throne and award to us our crown – and He is our

¹ Paul Ellingworth, “NIGTC: Hebrews”

promised reward (cf. Romans 8:16-18; 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Revelation 21-22). Let us all run together, with the perseverance which comes with our by faith – looking away from this world and unto Jesus!!