



“Let Us Run the Race with Endurance”
(Hebrews 12:1-3)

Introduction: The author to the Hebrews has now made his case, his hearers must press on toward Christ. Christ is the greatest prophet who ever lived. He is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, and greater than Joshua. Christ is the One whom the angels worship, the One who builds the house of God, the One who brings His people into the eternal rest of God. Christ is the Great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, whose priesthood is greater than that of Aaron’s, since He continues by the power of an indestructible life. The New Covenant He brings is better than the Old Covenant under Moses, for it has been enacted with better sacrifices and has better promises. Therefore, if his hearers are to be saved, they must keep pressing forward to the reality, to Christ, and not turn back again to the Old Covenant shadows which are fading and ready to disappear. It was through faith in the One whom the Old Covenant shadows pointed to anyway that gave the people of God salvation. They did not do all these great and mighty things in their own strength. They did not obtain the promises through their own works. But they looked forward to what these shadows pointed to that they might receive the Lord’s Messiah and inherit the promises by faith.

Now having shown them these things, he moves on to the application. Since these Old Covenant saints persevered in faith to the preserving of their souls,

We too must run the Christian race with endurance, if we are to obtain the prize.

I. The Christian life is in Scripture likened to a race. The author writes, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

- A. The apostle Paul also uses this same analogy in 1 Corinthians 9:24, where he writes, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”
1. This image is to suggest to us that the Christian life is a struggle. It is a contest, a competition. But who are we competing against?
 2. Though it may seem like Paul is saying that we are racing against each other, this is not the case. We are not. We are not to try and outdo one another in the Christian life, but rather help each other become the best we can be in the Lord. We are to try and outdo one another in showing honor to one another. Paradoxically, as we do this, we also advance our own progress toward the finish line. The more you help others, the more you excel.
 3. But since we are not competing against one another, against whom are we competing? The answer is against the devil -- for he is always at work trying to get us to turn off the course, to become discouraged, and even to quit the race --, against the world -- for it is also full of deadly evil which the devil uses to constantly draw our attention from the race --, and against our flesh - - our internal enemy that we carry with us wherever we go, which is constantly trying to pull us away from the race and toward the things of the world.
 4. It is against these enemies of our souls that we must strive and agonize if we are to win the prize. Paul says, “Run in such a way that you may win!” The person who wins is the one who gives it all he’s got. Those who only give one-half or two-thirds of three-quarters of their best, usually lose.
- B. The Spirit, through the author to the Hebrews, is exhorting us this evening to run this race.
1. It is the race which Christ sets before us, the same race that the heroes of the faith, we have read of, had to run. It is the race which we must also win, or we will be forever lost.
 2. The Scripture often exhorts the Covenant people of God to perseverance in this race because the possibility of failure does exist.
 - a. Think about the exhortations which the author to the Hebrews has used in his sermon.
 - b. He said, “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation” (2:1-3)?

- c. He said, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God" (3:12). "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any of one of you should seem to have come short of it" (4:1). "Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience" (4:11). "Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised" (10:35-36).
- d. Now why does he speak in this way? Is it possible for a true Christian to fall away from the Lord and be eternally lost? No, it isn't. So why does he speak this way? The author is simply recognizing the fact that not everyone who professes to be a Christian is truly a Christian. There are many false professors in the church. And there is only one way that the author, or anyone of us, may know who is genuine and who is false. The true Christian will listen to these warnings, take heed, and run the race to its end. The false professor may listen, but he will not heed. Somewhere along the line he will grow careless and falter and quit the race. The author is saying don't you be one of those who give up the race and abandon Christ. Persevere to the end. If you are truly the Lord's, He will give you the desire and the strength to do so.

II. But now seeing that there is a race to be won, what can we do to see it through to its end? We know that God will do His part, if we are truly His. But what can we do, what are we commanded to do to make greater progress? There are several things for us to consider here.

- A. First the author says, "Let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us."
 - 1. Now I believe that the author is making a distinction here between degrees of sin, or the different kinds of sins that get in our way.
 - a. Some encumber, and others easily ensnare. The latter are much more dangerous, but both hinder us in the race.
 - b. Anything that gets in the way of our progress to heaven, or impedes our progress in the race is sin. In this sense, even food can become an encumbrance, if we become obsessed with it. Remember the counsel that Susanna Wesley gave to her children, "Anything that takes away from your zeal for God or your relish for divine things, to you is sin."
 - c. We need to set aside the things that encumber us, whatever they might be, like the runner casts aside from himself anything which will keep him from finishing first.
 - d. But especially we need to lay aside "the sin which so easily entangles us," for this is our worst enemy. For each of us here there is a particular sin which we are more vulnerable to than others. That sin may be the same for many of us, but for many of us it may be different. It is called a besetting sin, because the devil often attacks us in that area. This sin especially needs to be laid aside.
 - e. As I said in the past, if we are under the dominion of any sin, if we are bound by it, which is shown by our not fighting against it, then we are still unconverted. But this doesn't mean that as Christians we won't have tremendous struggles as we strive to put off our sins. The author to the Hebrews is saying that they must be thrown off, they must be cast aside. A marathon runner would not dare to run a race with his legs tied up with a rope. In the same way, we cannot run the race to heaven ensnared in our besetting sins.
 - 2. I think John Bunyan, in his book *Pilgrim's Progress*, portrays this truth so well in the place he called Vanity Faire.
 - a. He writes, "Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair. It is kept all the year long. It beareth the name of Vanity Fair because the town where it is kept is lighter than vanity, Psalm 62:9; and also because all that is there sold, or that comes there, is vanity. As is the saying of the wise, 'All that cometh is vanity.' Ecclesiastes 11:8; see also Ecclesiastes 1:2-14; Ecclesiastes 2:11-17; Isaiah 40:17. This fair is no new erected business, but a thing of ancient standing; I will show you the original of it. Almost five thousand years ago, there were pilgrims walking to the Celestial City, as these two honest persons are: and Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, with their

companions, perceiving by the path that the pilgrims made, that their way to the city lay through this town of Vanity, they contrived here to set up a fair; a fair wherein, should be sold all sorts of vanity, and that it should last all the year long: therefore at this fair are all such merchandise sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honors, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts, as prostitutes, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. And, moreover, at this fair there is at all times to be seen juggling cheats, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves, and rogues, and that of every kind. Here are to be seen, too, and that for nothing, thefts, murders, adulteries, false swearers, and that of a blood red color. And as in other fairs of less moment, there are the several rows and streets, under their proper names, where such and such wares are sold; so here likewise you have the proper places, rows, streets, (namely, countries and kingdoms,) where the wares of this fair are soonest to be found. Here is the Britain Row, the French Row, the Italian Row, the Spanish Row, the German Row, where several sorts of vanities are to be sold. But, as in other fairs, some one commodity is as the chief of all the fair, so the ware of Rome and her merchandise is greatly promoted in this fair; only our English nation, with some others, have taken a dislike thereat. Now, as I said, the way to the Celestial City lies just through this town where this lusty fair is kept; and he that will go to the city, and yet not go through this town, 'must needs go out of the world.' 1 Corinthians 4:10. The Prince of princes himself, when here, went through this town to his own country, and that upon a fair day too; yea, and as I think, it was Beelzebub, the chief Lord of this fair, that invited him to buy of his vanities; yea, would have made him Lord of the fair, would he but have done him reverence as he went through the town. Yea, because he was such a person of honor, Beelzebub had him from street to street, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a little time, that he might, if possible, allure the Blessed One to cheapen and buy some of his vanities; but he had no mind to the merchandise, and therefore left the town, without laying out so much as one farthing upon these vanities. Matthew 4:1-8; Luke 4:5-8. This fair, therefore, is an ancient thing, of long standing, and a very great fair" (pp. 129-130).

- b. I hope you understand that Bunyon was speaking of the world in which we live. The things of the world, especially here in America, are very apt to hinder us in this race. We must be careful then not to become entangled by them, so that we might make it to the Celestial City. Many pilgrims set out on the path to that city, but ended up making their homes in the world.
- B. The second thing we are exhorted to do is to run the race with endurance.
1. There are those who set out in the race, but once they have gone a little ways and things become difficult, they quit. Jesus, in the parable of the sower, speaks of one type of soil that shows great promise, but when the heat of a trial comes, it withers away, because its roots were not deep. In other words, there are those who do well in fair weather, but when things get difficult, whatever faith they seem to have vanishes.
 2. The author tells us that this race requires endurance, it requires "the capacity to bear up under difficult circumstances." The Christian life is not easy. There are many enemies, as I have already said, trying to get us to give up. But like Christ we must set our faces like flint. We must purpose in our hearts that we are going to complete the race no matter how difficult things might get, no matter how much persecution we might face, no matter how much we might suffer.
- C. The third thing we must do is fix our eyes on Jesus.
1. When there is something that you want very badly, you can usually find a way to get it. When you are in a race, and you are tired and thirsty, the thought of the rest and refreshment at the finish line is a great incentive to endure what is left of the race and to push forward toward the finish line.
 2. The same is true of the Christian life. God gives us an incentive as well to push to the end. What is it? It is Christ. We must remember why it is we are running this race in the first place. It is not merely to enjoy the pleasures of heaven. It is not merely so we can stop working and enter into rest. It is not merely so we won't have to suffer anymore. If these are our only reasons, then we have missed the whole point of the Christian faith. If our main reason is not mainly that

we might have closer fellowship with the One who died and was raised again to save us, then something is wrong. We have not yet come to know Christ. Heaven would not be heaven without Him. He is what makes the race worth running.

3. But if we so see His beauty and have this desire to be with Him, how much more of an incentive do we have to run this race? The path of righteousness is the only path which leads to Him, therefore, we will run on it, no matter what the cost might be. We must fix our eyes on Him, for this will spur us on during those times when the race gets hard, and we feel like giving up.
 4. But as we consider Jesus, we must also consider what Jesus has done. He is the One who is the author and perfecter of our faith. He is the One who came that we might have something to believe. He is the One who provided us salvation through His perfect life and atoning death. He is the One who created faith in us by sending forth His Spirit to breathe into our souls the breath of life. He is also the One who, by that same Spirit, will bring our faith to completion. The work which He has begun in us, He will perfect until the day of Jesus Christ. When you grow weary in your race, consider what Jesus has promised and that He is able to bring you to the end of your pilgrimage.
 5. And lastly consider His example. Jesus had a race to run as well. He had a message to bring, a perfect life to live, and a death to die. It was particularly when He faced death, the hardest part of His race, that He set His eyes on the joy which was before Him, the joy of accomplishing the Father's will, the joy of redeeming His people, the joy of being exalted the right hand of God. With His eyes fixed on these, He endured the cross, thought nothing of the shame He would endure, and overcame. It strengthened Him to finish His race. When you are tempted to give up because things get too tough, consider what Christ did, and then do the same. Set Christ before you, and out of the sheer joy of the prospect of being with Him, run the race with endurance. Consider what Jesus had to endure at the hands of His enemies and how He overcame, so that you won't become discouraged and give up.
- D. The last thing I would draw your attention to is the first thing to which the author pointed, namely, the example of those who went before.
1. He says, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us . . . let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.
 2. Everyone of the examples that he has given us throughout the book, but especially those in chapter 11, was meant to be an encouragement to us. It shows us that, by the grace of God, it is possible to run the race and to make it to the end. Each of the characters listed in the chapter did, and each of them is now in heaven in the presence of Christ.
 3. They are testimonies to the fact that God's Word is true. His promises can be trusted. These men and women shared in the same weaknesses we share in. They had the same struggles. They fought the same enemies. But they overcame, not by their own power, but by the power of Jesus Christ.
 4. We can do the same, if we trust in the same Christ they trusted in, and endeavor by God's grace to live the same life they lived. Remember, simply believing the facts is not enough. Simply saying that you trust in Jesus will not get you to heaven. You must also run the race, live the life, overcome the flesh, the world and the devil, if you are to enter into heaven. If you do not overcome them, they will overcome you. It is the one who endures to the end who will be saved. It is those who finish the race that will be crowned. Paul says, "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then to it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:25-27).
 5. This race is one from which you cannot afford to be disqualified. To lose it is to lose everything. This alone should be incentive enough for you to do all you can to finish. But again, there is another incentive. Whenever you are tempted to give up, remember that Jesus has gone before you to prepare the way. He has done everything necessary to see you through. He knows what you are going through in your race, for He ran a much more difficult one Himself. And He has promised that if you trust in Him, He will see you through. With all of this going for you, you cannot fail, if you continually rely upon Him. Many others have run the race and completed it, you can as well, if you keep looking to Christ.

6. May the Lord use this to encourage us this evening, and throughout our lives, to keep moving forward in the Christian life until we reach the finish line. May the Lord grant that each one of here this evening may. Amen.