

## B. Following After the Witnesses (12:1-29)

Though the chapter break might suggest a change of topic, chapter 12 continues the same line of thought. Throughout his letter, and suited to his pastoral intent, the writer's approach has been to conclude sections of instruction with appropriate exhortation. So here, chapter 12 draws out the practical implications of the heritage of faith his readers enjoyed: "*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us...let us run with endurance the race set before us.*"

These Hebrews had endured all sorts of difficulty and suffering since openly embracing Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah, but they weren't alone in this. Yes, it was true that their forefathers hadn't suffered because of faith in the person of Jesus, but their faith was in the same God whose promises had now been fulfilled in Jesus. Their forefathers shared the same *essential* faith in Israel's God, and their faith had cost them just as dearly (11:35-38).

All of the considerations the writer set before his readers – the promises of the God who is faithful, the heritage of faith they enjoyed, the surety of the promises in Messiah Jesus, His triumphant reign and mediation and their share in Him – served their encouragement, but they also confronted them with their solemn obligation to show themselves faithful. If those who received Yahweh's promises clung to them in faith without ever seeing them fulfilled, how much more should those remain faithful who live in the "fullness of the times" – those who not only have seen all of the Lord's promises become "yes and amen" in Jesus, but are themselves sharers in His triumph, kingdom and glory?

1. The writer chose an interesting image in issuing his exhortation, namely that of a runner engaged in a strenuous athletic contest (12:1-2). This imagery is well suited to the matter at hand, and so it's not surprising to see Paul drawing on it as he spoke of the Christian life (ref. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; cf. also Acts 20:24; Galatians 2:1-2, 5:7; Philippians 2:14-16; 2 Timothy 4:7-8). This imagery connotes all sorts of other related images, such as training, discipline, focus, arduousness, perseverance, completion and victory. All of these are wrapped into the writer's exhortation, but he emphasized in particular the mindset and discipline that his readers needed to bring to their endeavor.
  - a. The first thing he mentioned concerns, not the contestants themselves, but the *witnesses* who surround them. This imagery underscores that the writer's point in chronicling the faithful in Israel's history was to provide encouragement to his readers in their own contest of faith. Their forefathers had faced the challenges of living faithfully, and they met and triumphed through those challenges as those who died without receiving the promises to which they attached their unwavering hope. These Hebrew Christians, on the other hand, had witnessed those promises fulfilled in Jesus; how much more, then, ought *they* persevere in faith, knowing that He had ascended to take His place at the right hand of power, where He was now ruling toward the goal of bringing all things into subjection to Himself?

These readers needed to know that they were surrounded by all of the faithful who preceded them. But not as observers watching and cheering them on, but as *examples* whose faithful "running" should encourage them in their own contest.

This multitude were “witnesses,” not in the sense of looking down on those in later generations as they ran their own race, but as faithful men and women who *testified* of their confidence in their God and His promises by their steadfastness and perseverance in faith. This “great cloud of witnesses” supplied strong encouragement to those who came after them, not by cheering them on like excited spectators in the stands, but by giving them an example to be imitated – by bearing witness to what a faithful human life entails.

b. The writer intended that his readers would draw encouragement and renewed resolve from their Israelite forefathers who completed their contest of faith well and faithfully. But this wasn’t enough; each contestant must compete in his own time and circumstance; *he must run the race God has uniquely set before him*. And this involves proper preparation. In particular, the writer highlighted the obvious fact that a runner who is serious about *winning* his contest will take pains to insure that he has addressed every possible impediment to victory.

- He’s not going to undertake his race wearing bulky or heavy clothing, but will make himself as unencumbered and agile as possible.
- So also he will be careful to identify and remedy anything in his outfitting that might possibly trip him up while he’s running. Only a fool comes to the starting line wearing shoes with untied laces, and runners in the ancient world gathered and tied up their long garment (“girded up their loins”) so that it wouldn’t entangle their legs.

As it pertains to “running” the Christian “race,” this sort of preparation involves removing all encumbrances and impediments that might hinder or jeopardize one’s faithfulness and perseverance in it. Interestingly, the Hebrews writer didn’t identify any specific things that weigh a person down (“*lay aside every encumbrance*”), but then mentioned *sin* as an entangling power that very easily trips up the Christian “runner” and causes him to fall (12:1).

He didn’t specify any particular encumbrances, but also spoke of sin in general, without providing any further clarification. This may seem odd at first glance, but it’s actually perfectly appropriate. Indeed, naming specific “sins” would likely lead his readers to miss his point. Certainly that would be the case with contemporary readers. For the common tendency is to associate “sin” with particular offenses or transgressions, but the biblical terminology (in Hebrew as well as Greek) speaks to the general nature of human failure rather than a catalog of behaviors and offenses. As a scriptural concept, sin has to do with *deviation* from what is right, true or appropriate, and so is often defined as “missing the mark.” The concept of sin pertains to *truth* versus *falseness* more than good and bad conduct. And inasmuch as it is a human phenomenon, sin concerns a person’s deviation from the truth of human existence as human beings are the image and likeness of God. *Put most simply, sin refers to human existence that is less than or other than what God created His human creatures to be.*

With this understanding, it becomes clear that the catalog of things that Christians (and people in general) typically designate as “sin” are actually *symptoms* of it; at bottom, they are simply the psychological, spiritual, and behavioral manifestations of human deviation from the truth of man as God’s image-son. This, then, has a couple of crucial implications for the present context:

First, this understanding of sin helps illumine the writer’s perspective and intent in issuing his exhortation. The obligation he was imposing on his readers reaches far beyond identifying and turning away from certain errant behaviors. His concern wasn’t so much with “sinful” actions that can lead to stumbling, but with a *mind* that deviates from the truth – a mind that fails to conform to the truth of the Christian’s identity, renewal and destiny in Jesus (so the emphasis of verse 12:2). In the case of his Hebrew audience, the primary issue was distracted and distorted thinking resulting from the pressures coming against them, thinking that worked to undermine their steadfastness in faith (10:26-39).

Second, the wider context shows that the writer was especially concerned with the sin of *disbelief* – that is, compromise in one’s faith in Jesus that results in *unfaithfulness* (cf. 3:1-4:11). And this understanding shows why and how this sin so easily *entangles*. Foremost, Christian disbelief involves distraction and subtle deception. No runner comes to the starting line wearing clothing that he knows might entangle his legs. If he’s tripped up during his race, it’s by something that escaped his notice at the start, or that shifted or came loose while he was running.

So it is with the sin of disbelief. It’s relatively easy for Christians to identify and deal with their sinful behaviors; it’s far more difficult to detect and address the subtle motions of their minds and hearts that work against their faith and faithfulness. Indeed, even mature Christians can confuse faithlessness with faith when it comes to matters that are personally significant. The greater a person’s longing for a particular outcome, the greater his propensity to seek and expect that outcome from God. In this way, he substitutes *presumption* for faith, typically without even recognizing it (cf. Psalm 91 with Matthew 4:5-7). So pride in the Christian heart very naturally cloaks itself in the guise of a commitment to holy living (Colossians 2:20-23), just as self-preoccupation and self-concern often present themselves as “godly sorrow” (2 Corinthians 7:8-10).

- c. The writer instructed his readers that faithfully running the race appointed for them required that they set aside the things that could impede them or cause them to stumble. Finishing and winning their race depended on discarding certain things, but it also depended on holding tightly to something: *They needed to “fix their eyes on Jesus”* (12:2). The verb the writer chose is significant in that it connotes two distinct, but related actions. The one is obvious from the English rendering, which is setting one’s gaze on an object – in this case, Jesus Himself. The second is more implicit, but absolutely critical to the verb’s meaning. This implied action is *looking away from* what was the previous object of attention.

The writer understood that hardship, affliction and suffering have the effect of causing the sufferer to become preoccupied with finding a remedy. So it was with his readers. But whatever they happened to be looking to in the hope of finding relief, they needed to turn their eyes away from it and lock their gaze on Jesus – the long-awaited Deliverer on whom they had fixed their hope in the first place.

Like all who suffer, these Hebrew believers longed for relief and deliverance. The easiest way to obtain it was to soften their commitment to Jesus as Israel's Messiah, and some were doubtless tempted to forsake Him altogether. But the writer wanted them to understand that the answer to their suffering was to hold all the more tightly to Him – *specifically as the One who is “the author and perfecter of faith.”* This phrase is often interpreted in terms of personal faith, but the writer was speaking of *the* faith: faith as the new mode of human relationship with God that Jesus inaugurated by His own faithful commitment to fulfill His Father's purposes and promises (cf. Galatians 3:15-29, esp. vv. 22-26).

Jesus inaugurated this “faith” as the new human paradigm through His atoning death and His resurrection as consummate Image-Son. But that triumph was the culmination of His entire *life* lived as an authentic human being – a son of Adam (“Son of Man”) whose relationship with God was defined and governed by faith and faithfulness (ref. Galatians 2:20, where “faith in the Son of God” should be rendered “the *faithfulness* of the Son of God”; cf. also Romans 3:21-22).

Jesus has become the “author and perfecter of faith” by means of His own personal life as the true man of faith. His faith and faithfulness reached their apex in His self-offering at Calvary (cf. Luke 22:41-42; John 12:23-32, 14:30-31 with Matthew 27:43), and this is what the Hebrews writer was pointing to when he exhorted his readers to fix their eyes on Him who, “*in faith, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and disregarded its disgrace and shame.*”

- If their Israelite forefathers stood before them as examples of the triumph of human faith and faithfulness, how much more was that true of the faithful Man who fulfilled in Himself Israel's identity and calling as son, disciple, servant, and witness?
- And if they could rightly draw strength for their struggle of faith from their faithful ancestors, how much more should their encouragement and resolve be grounded in the supremely faithful Son of Abraham?

For there was no dimension or degree of suffering or tribulation that He did not endure; indeed, the supreme agony of Calvary was the culmination of a life of hardship that derived from His faithfulness to His Father's will and work (John 15:18-25). Jesus' path of sonship was the path of the suffering of faith (Hebrews 5:7-8). How could these Hebrews, who had embraced Him as the One in whom they obtained their own authentic sonship, believe that their path of sonship unto its perfection would somehow differ from His (12:2-3; ref. also 2:5-3:6)?