

## EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS

### Message #32

### Hebrews 12:1-3

In the Bible there are many metaphors used to describe the Christian life. For example, in II Timothy Paul compares the Christian life to being the life of a good soldier, a hardworking farmer, and a prizewinning athlete (II Tim. 2:3-6). In Ephesians 6, Paul compares the Christian life to being a struggle like a wrestling match (Eph. 6:12). In I Corinthians 9, he compares the Christian life to being the life of a boxer (I Cor. 9:26). In Romans 7, he compares the Christian life to being a marriage (Rom. 7:4-7).

When we come to Hebrews 12, the Christian life is compared to being in a race. Not a short sprint race but a long endurance race. The primary point of this text is clear:

**A BELIEVER'S CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIKE AN ENDURANCE RACE, AND TO FINISH A WINNER WE NEED TO GET RID OF ANY FAITH HINDRANCES AND KEEP OUR FAITH-FOCUS ON JESUS CHRIST.**

Here is a great training manual for finishing the Christian life a winner. In these verses there are three training secrets for running your race and finishing a winner:

**TRAINING SECRET #1** – The crowd motivation for running a good Christian endurance race. **12:1a**

When you realize that you are being monitored by quality people, it tends to make you want to be at your best. Many years ago, I was asked to fill in on a Wednesday night for Pastor George Gardiner at Calvary Church in Grand Rapids. I prepared thoroughly for the study that I was to give, and on the night I was to give it I went to church. When it came time for me to teach, I was introduced and I stood up and there sitting in the audience was Don Wyrzten. Here was a man who had been used by God all over the world. He wrote hymns like “Worthy is the Lamb” and “Unbounded Grace” which he wrote with John Walvoord. Knowing he was there raised my pulse, and I certainly was motivated to do my best. That is exactly the point here.

The motivation that is given first for actually running this race is that “we have so great a cloud of witnesses.” Now the word “witness” (μαρτυρων) is the word that refers to those who gave witness, proof, testimony, and evidence to their faith (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, pp. 278-279). There have been at least three legitimate interpretive views as to what this actually means:

**View #1** - It refers to all believers who are monitoring our race.

The writer pictures us as running a race in a stadium and we are being observed by a great cloud of heavenly believers who are wondering how we are going to finish (I Corinthians 4:9).

**View #2** - It refers to angels who are always monitoring our Christian life.

Various passages suggest that we are on display before angels and we need to let them see a godly performance (I Timothy 5:21; Ephesians 3:10; I Corinthians 4:9).

**View #3** - It refers to the list of believers he just mentioned in Hebrews 11.

The lives of those mentioned in Hebrews 11 become impetus for the rest of us to keep our faith-focus on Jesus Christ and run the race. Those heroes of Hebrews 11 become an example to us to struggle on by faith and succeed. All of them say to us, believe God's Word, don't stop and don't quit.

The witness list that we have in Hebrews 11 is a list of a bunch of sinners who kept their faith on God and His Word and by faith they did things for God. They were not perfect people by any means. But they made a strong run to the finish line, so there is hope for all of us.

It is possible that all three are true.

**TRAINING SECRET #2** – The disciplined requirements for running a good Christian endurance race. **12:1b-d**

There are three specific training requirements which are necessary for running the endurance race in a way that will enable us to win.

The specific verbal that goes with the first two training requirements is the participle “let us lay aside” (αποτιθημι). This is a middle voice participle which means we have the responsibility in and of ourselves to be involved in this training requirement action. The word literally means to put off a garment and stow it away (G. Abbott Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 55).

We have the responsibility to put off from ourselves and stow away the specific things mentioned here so we can run a good endurance race.

**Discipline Requirement #1** - We need to get rid of extra weight . **12:1b**

The word “encumbrance” (ογκος) is the word that refers to weight in the sense of bulk and mass that actually is an encumbrance (Smith, p. 309). It is interesting that this word “onchos” is a medical term which is used for a cancer specialist called an oncologist. He is one who deals with the concept of getting rid of extra cancerous weight like tumors.

**If we are to run a good Christian race, we are going to have to join a “weight watchers” program.** Now you may say, “Well I am already a good weight watcher; I watch my weight continue to rise all of the time.” You can be a legitimate weight watcher if you get on the scale every day and look at your weight. I know some of you own treadmills that you probably haven't been on but a handful of times since you bought it.

Dr. S. Lewis Johnson said he bought a treadmill and used it one time in four years. He said when he was getting ready to do an exposition of this particular text, he specifically went into the room where the treadmill was and looked at it. He didn't get on it and use it, but he did look at it because he was convicted he needed to be a weight watcher (*Hebrews 12:1-3*, pp. 2-3). Perhaps before you all go to bed tonight you can go and at least look at your dusty treadmill so you can feel good about this message.

People will go to all kinds of extremes to watch their weight. Some like jogging, or as J. Dwight Pentecost used to call it “jiggling.” Some like aerobic classes. I read an interesting article just recently that said women seem to like to exercise together more than men. I like to exercise alone, and frankly I don’t like anyone around when I do exercise. I am sweating and I stink and flab is bouncing around. I like to exercise in private. Some like riding a bike. Some like walking. Some like isometrics. Now they have invented this crazy ball you are supposed to sit on or lay back on that supposedly will help you lose weight. I tried sitting on one of those things and it seems to me all it did was made my flab a little more bouncy.

**The admonition here is not about watching the weight; it is about getting rid of the weight.** You cannot possibly run a good race if you are overweight. Now before half of you storm out mad and depressed and go to a restaurant and order everything on the menu and mumble and say you are never coming back to Texas Corners Bible Church because they are lecturing you on your weight, you need to know that **this is not talking about physical weight, but of “every” type of weight that can slow down our spiritual life.**

If we are going to run a good race we will have to keep our weight down, which means we will need to put aside certain encumbering weights. Well the question is what is the weight we need to get rid of? The text does not say; it just says get rid of “every encumbrance.”

I think it varies to the individual. **It is clear that the “encumbrance weights” are not “sins” because he will mention sin next.** The weights or encumbrances to which the writer must be referring would be anything that could slow us down in our relationship with God. This is not talking about sinful stuff, but anything that could prevent us from running a good race for God.

It could be exercising, gardening, or hunting. It could be football, baseball, or basketball, or hockey. It could be a TV or computer. It could be reading or a relationship. It could be golf or guns or sports or business. If anything is slowing us down in our relationship with God, we need to lay it aside. We need to put it away. We must always keep our sights fixed on the finish line.

W. H. Griffith Thomas said that one time a Christian asked whether or not a certain thing that was not sinful would do them any harm. The response was, “It won’t do you any harm if you don’t want to win.” There are many things we need to assess in our lives to make sure they are not taking precedence over our relationship with God. We need to trim the weight and trim the fat of anything that could keep us from winning or that could slow us down. A wise thing for each of us to do is to ask God to put on our hearts and minds anything that could slow us down in our relationship with Him.

**Discipline Requirement #2** - We need to get rid of easily besetting sin. **12:1c**

The Greek construction here is strong because the grammar is article, adjective, noun (την ευπεριστατον αμαρτιαν). The article “the” goes with the noun “sin,” but in between is the adjective “easily besetting” or “easily encircling.” Now the article “the” and noun “sin” are both singular. What I understand this to mean is that there is a singular sin that really dogs you or hounds you. There is a sin that seems to be able to get at you “easily.”

It is possible that it refers to the sin of unbelief. Dr. S. Lewis Johnson said unbelief is a sin that does “dog our feet constantly” (*Hebrews 12:1-3*, p. 6).

It is also possible that it refers to a specific sin that seems to easily get you to trip up and miss the mark of the righteousness of God.

You can certainly build a case for saying that each believer has his or her own particular sin-issue that needs to be faced and ridded. If we look at Paul’s list in Galatians 5:19-21, which are sins of the flesh, then here are some possibilities:

- 1) Some could struggle with the sin of sexually immoral things - lustful impure and sensual things forbidden by God.
- 2) Some could struggle with sinful idolatry - something more important to you than God.
- 3) Some could struggle with sinful strife and hatred.
- 4) Some could struggle with a sinful temper.
- 5) Some could struggle with sinful jealousy.
- 6) Some could struggle with being sinfully argumentative.
- 7) Some could struggle with sinful envy.
- 8) Some could struggle with sinful drunkenness.
- 9) Some could struggle with sinful pride.

Whatever may be our sin struggle, God expects us to lay it aside if we are to win our race.

**Discipline Requirement #3** - We need to know our Christian life will be an endurance race.  
**12:1d**

The Christian life will not be a short 100 yard dash. It is likely to be a long, tough, marathon race and in order to run it and finish it we need endurance, perseverance, and patience.

Now I have run many 26.2 mile marathons in my life and I can tell you it is a long, long run. There are many secrets to running it. One of the keys is you must run your own race. You must patiently get into your own pace and hold it mile after mile.

Now I want you to notice that we are to continually run this race “that is set before us.” We all have our own race to run. I have my race and you have yours. I cannot run your race and you cannot run mine. We each have our own race mapped out for us. Some will be longer than others. I have to finish my race and you have to finish yours. It will take patience and it will take perseverance. **God has mapped out a race course for each of us and each of us who get to the finish line by faith will win our race.**

We have the responsibility to trim weight and sin from our own lives and patiently endure whatever comes our way until we get to the finish line. We need a firm resolve that we are going to the finish line despite any fatigue, hardship, obstacle, weariness, or pain.

**TRAINING SECRET #3** – The finish line focus of running a good endurance race. **12:2-3**

The secret to running a good faith race is to keep our faith-focus and our eyes on Jesus from start to finish. As Ray Stedman said, “this is the central theme of Hebrews” (*Hebrews*, p. 136). Notice the writer uses the name “Jesus” and not the name “Christ.” The name Jesus stresses the fact that we are to fix our eyes on Jesus not only as a human example but as our Savior.

Now there are **three main Christological facts** brought out about Jesus:

**Christological Fact #1** - Jesus is the author and the perfecter of faith. **12:2a**

The word “author” (αρχηγος) means that Jesus is the founder, the originator, the beginning of “the faith” (Smith, p. 62). We know from Hebrews 2:10 that He is the One who originated our faith. The word “perfecter” (τελειωτην) means Jesus is the consummator and the finisher of faith; the One who brings faith to completion (*Ibid.*, p. 442). We must keep our faith-focus on Jesus Christ all through our endurance race from start to finish. He is the One who gave us our faith and He is the One who will complete our faith. In fact, He Himself demonstrated a start-to-finish faith when He came to this world.

Notice what the text says and what it does not say. The text says that Jesus is the author and perfecter of “the faith”; it does not specifically say of “our” faith. In other words, Jesus is the ultimate example of what “the faith” actually is from start to finish. It is a faith that keeps its focus on the Word of God and will of God until we finish our race. That is the kind of faith Jesus demonstrated and that is the kind of faith we need.

If we are going to run the race to the finish line, we need to fix the eyes of our faith on Jesus Christ. There is no other faith-focus we may have that will get us to the finish line of our life endurance race. There is a great list of faith heroes in Hebrews 11, but we will not make it to the finish line by just keeping our faith-eyes on them; we need to set our sights on Jesus Christ.

**Christological Fact #2** - Jesus endured the cross with joy knowing He would save us. **12:2b**

Don’t miss what is said here; Jesus Christ endured the cross. The emphasis of the idea of “enduring” is that He could have at any moment stopped the process. This speaks of an active endurance and perseverance. He endured the shame, the hate, the hostility, and the pain of the cross. He who knew no sin became sin for us and He took the full brunt of God’s wrath for us, and when He cried “it is finished,” He had endured it all.

Notice what is said here, He did this because of “the joy set before Him.” Jesus endured the terrible agony of the cross and all of the shame that went with it, because He knew that He would save us and He knew that He would again be reunited with His Father.

**Christological Fact #3** - Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. **12:2c**

The fact that He is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God indicates His saving work is finished. There is no more sacrifice that needs to be made.

Now in **verse 3** the writer says, you consider Jesus Christ and the hostility He endured by sinners, for sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Those words “grow weary and lose heart” were athletic terms. They were used of runners who would become so fatigued that they would collapse.

The writer of Hebrews says, if you don't want to collapse and if you want to make it to the finish line, you keep your faith-focus on Jesus Christ. As Kent Hughes said, “be totally absorbed with Jesus” (*Hebrews*, p. 163).

In other words, keep running your race and keep looking straight at Jesus Christ.

#### **PARTING THOUGHTS:**

- 1) Every believer must run his own faith race.**
- 2) We need to get rid of or reject certain things if we are to run effectively.**
- 3) The Christian life will be like a long distance run; it will be difficult and will take faith perseverance. Faith comes by hearing God's Word. You come to church to hear it.**
- 4) If we are to run well, we must keep our faith-focus on Jesus Christ from start to finish.**