

It was Mexico City 1968. John Akwari of Tanzania had started the Olympic marathon with all the other runners, but he finished it alone. When he finally arrived at the stadium there were only a few spectators remaining. The winner of the marathon had finish line over an hour earlier.

It was getting dark; his right leg was bandaged and heavily bleeding because of a fall he had taken near the start of the race due to so many runners in a small space. He was obviously in great pain, but he crossed the finish line. A reporter asked him why he didn't just quit. He said, "My country did not send me here to start the race; my country sent me here to finish it."

This passage in Hebrews 12 refers to running a race. The word for race is the Greek word *agon* from which we get the English word *agony*. The Christian life calls for discipline, endurance, and determination. There are two things you need to understand about the race we are going to talk about today. First of all, your race is a personal race. The author of Hebrews says, "***Let us run the race that is set before us.***" God has given you a race to run and God has given me a race to run. You cannot run my race and I cannot run your race. But we are to each run our own race. Second, there will be struggles along the way, but God is there for us to guide, guard and give us his wisdom.

I think St. Paul would have been an Olympics fan too. Twice he refers to running a race, completing a race, and his best friend Barnabus does so in our reading today. St. Paul said in *1 Cor. 9:24*, "***Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.***" Here we need to be aware that, unlike gold, silver, and bronze, all who cross the finish line in faith, win. It is not their own efforts, but God working in them to achieve the goal, eternal life in Heaven. We learn in this passage of Scripture exactly how to do it.

In order to cross the finish line, we need to know or continue in several things. "***Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight...***" (Heb. 12:1a) Now the picture here is that of a coliseum where the great races were run back in Bible days. There is a great crowd in the stands. They're called "a cloud of witnesses." Now the word "witnesses" does not mean "spectators" as though these are people watching us from heaven. The word witness literally means "someone who gives testimony to a truth."

The writer (probably Barnabus) is talking about those runners who have already crossed the finish line and are now in Heaven waiting for us. Specifically, he is referring to all of those great heroes of the faith that he just talked about in Chapter 11; our spiritual forefathers, who have run the parallel race that we are running now.

These witnesses are encouragers to us who come along after them. They encourage us because they ran their race and completed their race. You need to understand that every one of those heroes in the Bible that you read about in the Old Testament were men and women just like you and me. We can see the examples of the saints who have gone before us. The Old Testament was written as the Bible says in *Rom. 15:4*, "***For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.***"

These people we read about in the Old Testament were meant to give us encouragement and to be our examples. For example: Maybe you have lost your family, or your health, or your job. Well, Job would stand up and say, 'I've been there. I know what it is to lose everything. But God is faithful—never give up!'

Perhaps you are saying, 'I'm thinking, life hasn't been fair to me. I've been treated so unjustly.' Well, Joseph stands up and says, "I know what it's like to be treated unfairly. I know what it's like when life deals you a bad hand. I was thrown in prison for something I didn't even do; left, abandoned in a pit, by my brothers. But I learned that God is good even when life is not—have the patience to see God's plan for you."

You may be saying, "I'm so discouraged. I'm facing some huge problems and I just don't know if I can overcome it." Well, David says, "I have been there. I faced the biggest giant who ever lived, and by the power of God I triumphed—hang in there."

Yes, we are to be encouraged by those who have gone before us, and they know a lot about how to run the race. First of all, "***get rid of everything that weighs us down...***" If you are going to run, you must lay aside every weight. Nobody runs a race with a suitcase in each hand. When you run a race, you get as light as you can. I used to have these 3 lb. weights in h.s. I made the mistake of wearing them in practice; I about killed my knees.

Get rid of things that slow you down in your relationship with God. Even things that are not sin can become sin. For example: Some people like to fish. Now there is nothing wrong with fishing, but if fishing keeps you from church, that's a problem! Some people like to drink alcohol, but if alcohol gets to the point of controlling your life, it has to go. Whenever we face a situation or item that could be a problem, just ask yourself a few questions like these: **Does it build me up spiritually?** Is what I'm doing, what I'm watching, what I'm listening to increasing and enhancing my spiritual walk with the Lord; bringing me closer to God or further away? **Does it have power over me?** It could be excess food. It could be alcohol or tobacco or television. **Could my actions block someone from Jesus?** Simply put, is this activity possibly a stumbling block to someone else who does not know the Lord Jesus Christ. Leave Behind Whatever makes your spiritual race a grind.

We are also to "***lay aside the sin which so easily ensnares us...***" Imagine running with chains around your ankles. That is exactly what sin does to you. Sin trips you up. It breaks my heart to know of some wonderful people who had wonderful marriages and who have lost it because they let sin trip them up. The word for "**ensnare**" is a word that refers to a vine that wraps itself around a tree. You see that is exactly what sin will do. It will trip you and make you fall flat on your face.

You see Satan has a threefold strategy as you run your race. He will try to tempt you to quit running or get off the track. We call that discouragement and weariness. That's why the author of Hebrews goes on to say in verse 3: "***For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.***" You see the greatest enemy to a marathon runner is fatigue. Sin will not only trip you up, it will tire you out. It will sap your spiritual strength and your spiritual energy. Leave it behind.

One of the things that can weigh us down is hardship. God, strangely, calls it discipline. And, in an understatement, God says, "***no discipline is pleasant at the time but painful. Later however, it produces a harvest of righteousness (goodness) for those who have been trained by it.***" God—believe it or not—disciplines us because he loves us. Why? Cuz it keeps our focus toward our Savior Jesus and away from sinful temptation. When we are flat on our backs, there is only one way to look—up! When you are in pain, one of two things will happen: either you will become angry with God or you will trust God even more.

It's not how you start your race, it's how you finish it that counts. Jesus is not timing you with a stopwatch; He is measuring you with a measuring-tape. It's really not how fast you run, it's how far you run that really counts with the Lord. You must run with determination. The secret to winning the race is to focus on the finish. That's why we continue to read, "**...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**" In any race the most important thing is to keep your eyes fixed on the goal, focused on the finish.

We are to look to Jesus because He is "**the author and finisher of our faith.**" What does that mean? He is the author of our faith. He is the one that puts us into the race. But He is also the finisher of our faith, and He will be waiting on us at the end. That's exactly what the Bible means when it says in Phil. 1:6, "**He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.**" He is watching you and He is waiting for you.

Have you ever thought about the fact that not every race allows the competitors to see the finish line? If you've ever watched sculling in the Olympics, you've seen those long sleek beautiful shells and those men who are synchronizing their rowing as they pull those long oars through the water propelling that boat in the race. Now think about it. Those men have their backs to the finish line. So how do they finish so strong? How do they pace themselves? How do they know when they've hit the tape? Well, the answer is, they focus on the coxswain. He's the guy with the megaphone sitting at the end of the boat facing the crew. He is the only one who knows where the finish line is. So, the men at the oars look to him, listen to him, obey his commands and count on him to coach them to the finish. They trust him completely and totally to get them across the finish line in the strongest possible way. You see, the way you win the race is not by focusing on the finish line, because we don't know where the finish line is. The way you run and the way you win is by focusing on Jesus.

Maintaining our faith is a struggle, a constant battle. We want to think it to be a cakewalk, but it is not. Some believers are frustrated because they think life ought to be easy. But it is not. There are no shortcuts.

When we lived in Kingman, Az., Julie and I got to take a ride up Hualapai Mtn. On the backside; in an ATV; in and after a serious rain. There was a time when our wheels were about 10 inches from a 700 ft drop. But the driver was steady. We went over a lot of bumps. It was fun, but it wasn't easy. But it was worth it! Just like our ride to Heaven, bumps and scary drops and all.