

THE CHRISTIAN RACE

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:1-2.

These words were addressed first to a group of Jewish Christians who had discovered that the Christian life was much more difficult than they had expected. In the light of its hardships, they were beginning to wonder if they should abandon their high aims and great hopes. To keep them from turning back, and to encourage them to go forward without hesitation, this message was recorded.

These verses were written at a time when foot racing was very popular. Vast throngs of spectators assembled to witness these races. A race before huge crowds was a great inspiration and a tremendous challenge to the runners. When the race was finished the winner was crowned in triumph and awarded a prize of considerable value.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews compared himself and his fellow Christians to the runners in a race. The Christian life is here represented as a race. The Christian is pictured as a runner competing for the prize. A race must have a beginning, progress and a goal. The beginning, however promising, is not enough. It is the going on that counts. It is the finish that spells victory. Early in the last war Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran minister, was arrested by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp. Whereupon his father, a retired preacher, decided to reenter the active ministry and to do what he could to carry on the work of his courageous son. He prepared and delivered a sermon that became famous -- a sermon to which he gave the subject, "It Depends Upon the End." In it he told the story of Napoleon's mother, who one day said to her emperor-son, "Son, you think you are Napoleon, the world conqueror. But you have an anxious mother who asks you where you will end up, what will your outcome be?" It is a question that may well be asked any of us, "Where will you end up, what will your outcome be?"

This figure of a race was used by the author of Hebrews to illustrate Christian life. The idea of a race is generally that of competition, but not so here. Here it is that of concentration of purpose or singleness of aim.

Even though the Christian life is not easy, every Christian should strive to become better. For everyone who is striving to become a better Christian and to run a good race there are some excellent and wise admonitions in our text.

I. Refuse The Handicaps That Will Defeat You.

These handicaps are called:

1. Weights.

"Let us lay aside every weight." Every sensible runner would lay aside everything that might impede his progress. Long in advance of the race he would submit to the most rigorous physical exercises and the most strict discipline in order to get rid of all superfluous

flesh. Then, when the time for the race arrived, he would relieve himself of every encumbrance in order that he might win the coveted prize. A man in training would dispense with many things that were permissible for others. He would discipline himself in order to run well.

A weight denotes whatever would put a person to a disadvantage in running. Things which prove to be weights need not necessarily be sins. Even things that are lawful may not be expedient. It is not a sin for an athlete to eat delicious candy and rich pastries, but to do so would handicap him in his playing. It is not a sin for a father to carry his child in his arms, but he would not attempt to run a race while doing so. A weight may be entirely legitimate, nay, to others a help and a blessing; but, if it is an impediment in the race, it must be laid aside. It is a well-known fact that many capable men have minimized their influence because they have not laid aside every weight.

Many Christians try to avoid the things that are primarily sinful, but they carry a lot of excess baggage in the form of doubtful habits, trifling interests or second-best activities. This matter of weights takes us into the realm of living where things that are innocent can be carried too far. As Christians we have entered a race and started for a goal. If we are to reach that goal and win the prize, we must lay aside whatever hinders speed, retards progress and impairs efficiency. If anything does not make us stronger and more useful servants of Christ, it is a weight that must be laid aside. Anything that would tend to rob Christ of the first place in your life, rob you of the reality of His presence and the sweetness of His fellowship, injure your Christian influence in the least, mar your testimony, or grieve the Holy Spirit is a weight to be laid aside.

2. Sin.

"And the sin which doth so easily beset us." While all kinds of sin are weakening in their effect, the root form of evil which the author had in his mind when he urged Christians to lay aside the sin which so easily beset is that of unbelief. The sin of unbelief is the very opposite of the grace of faith which was commended so highly in chapter eleven.

Sin always produces weakness. It saps the strength of the runner who is out to make a success in the Christian race. Loyalty to God spells power, whereas disloyalty to Him produces feebleness. To distrust God, to doubt His promises or to struggle against His will always lands us in trouble.

Many are carrying excess baggage, to the profitless exhaustion of both mind and body. To get rid of a lot of these impediments is both a duty and a privilege.

If we are to run the Christian race successfully, we must lay aside sin, even such sins as a suspicious attitude, a critical spirit, a jealous feeling, an irritable temper, an unforgiving spirit and evil habits. Young people often yield to evil desires, older people to fretfulness and peevishness, the rich to pride and grasping for power, the poor to repinings against God, the healthy to forgetfulness of God and the sick to rebellion against Him. All of these

sinful dispositions and evil habits are injurious to ourselves, to others and to the world, and are very displeasing and dishonoring to God. These weights and sins are within our own hearts and are to be laid aside by us. Let us not keep anything in our hearts or lives that would hinder us in running the Christian race successfully and gloriously.

II. Realize The Helps That Will Advance You.

The track was laid out, the starting-point and the goal were marked, and over this course every runner had to race if he hoped to reach the goal and to win the prize. Running implied exertion, progression and perseverance.

The Christian life is a race that requires exertion. Being a Christian is an exacting business. We must run the Christian race in downright earnestness. We must expect to put forth effort, and not to be "carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease." This race course is marked out for us in the Word of God. If we are to run this race successfully we should do certain things:

1. Maintain a proper sense of direction.

We are to "run the race that is set before us." Some years ago, in a football game at the Rose Bowl, a player got possession of the ball and made a seventy-yard run. It was a brilliant play except for one thing -- he ran in the wrong direction. In his confusion he lost sight of the right goal.

2. Understand that the course is not easy.

"And let us run with patience the race that is set before us." The expression, "set before us," means a course that has been marked out for us. This is the secret of a victorious and gloriously happy life. Put your feet in the pathway that the Lord has marked out for you. Put your life in the center of His will. Make an unconditional surrender of your all to Him and then run with persistence. The Christian life is not a perpetual picnic. It is an adventure with Christ along a road with many, many hurdles. It requires exertion. It calls for stamina. It demands perseverance.

That which is required of us is not the patience of those who stand in line and cannot do anything except wait. It is rather the patience of the plodder who, in spite of all weakness and opposition, persists in going on. The Lord wants staying power that will last until life's final breath.

Along with the many beautiful pictures in the scripture gallery are some sad ones. They are the portraits of men and women who started well in the service of the Lord, but fell before some obstacle. Because they turned back, they had to be labeled quitters. Of course, nobody admires a quitter.

Among the quitters was Demas, a friend and companion of Paul. For a while he went along to help Paul carry the message of Jesus Christ the Saviour. Then, for Demas, the glamor wore off. It was pretty tough, this being looked upon with suspicion or disdain or hatred by the people in practically every city they visited. Besides there wasn't much in it of a material nature. So Demas quit the race, and Paul wrote, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world."

3. Remember that you are one of a glorious company. If I may use the language heard in athletic circles, you are playing on a great team. In the English the word "witness" has two meanings -- a spectator and one who gives his evidence. In the Greek the word "witness" means confessor -- a witness who has borne testimony to the power of faith in his own life. This vast cloud of witnesses includes those who, in every age and in every land, have run their race with faithful devotion and whose inspiring example is left to us to spur us on to greater achievements. Those dedicated minds which have given their best thought to the work of Christ, those pioneers who have blazed new trails of Christian service, those teachers who have lighted the way of knowledge through the centuries, those martyrs who have given their blood that the Christian faith might not perish from the earth, and the Christ Whom they served are challenging us to carry the torch of godly living and helpful Christian service which they have bequeathed to us. God forbid that we should fail to do so! God grant that we may be aroused to activity, to exertion, to progression and to perseverance by the example of those who have triumphed already through Christ.

III. Remember The Hero Who Has Gone Ahead Of You.

"Let us run the race that is set before us, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Christ is the answer to the deepest needs of our souls, the object of supreme interest and the dearest object of human love.

Our attention is to be drawn away from everything else and fixed exclusively upon Christ. We are to look upon Him as the greatest exemplar of faith. He is the most eminent illustration of the faith which we ought to cherish and manifest.

We are to look to Christ, the atoning and joyful sufferer on the cross, by trusting Him as our Saviour, by leaning upon Him for our strength and by copying Him as our pattern. As we run the Christian race, we shall find ourselves improving, our lives more useful, our hearts more joyful, our pathways more glorious and our prospects more wonderful.

A few years ago the University of Southern California was about to play its most important game of the season. On her team was an All-American by the name of Ed Smith. Only a few days before the game the mother of this star player passed away. She had followed her son's football career with interest and affectionate delight. She was to have occupied a box at the packed football stadium at the game that afternoon. Until game time it was not known by the crowd whether Ed would play or not. When the team trotted on the field, there he was.

Just a few moments before the opening whistle Ed walked over to the box where his mother would have sat. It was draped in black and on her seat there rested a large picture of her. The big player, helmet doffed, stood before it a moment and then, as he turned to leave, he said, "Mother, I'm playing this game for you." With that, he was off to add another brilliant performance to his record.

Let that scene fade quickly away and another take its place. Not before a flag-draped photograph do we stand today, you and I; but

before a blood-stained cross where hangs the Lord of glory, our sin-bearing Saviour. He's waiting to hear the good word from our lips. Shall we not say, "Lord, I'm taking this game of life, which somehow is more than a game, and -- I'm playing it for YOU."

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus;
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow
strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace."