

THE GLORY OF GOING ON

"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 first addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who were finding that the Christian life upon which they had entered was much more difficult than they had expected. They had discovered that the new life was distressingly full of difficulties and persecutions. They were beginning to wonder if they should abandon their high aims and their great hopes. It was to encourage them and to keep them from turning back that this message was written. They were urged, not to draw back, but to go forward without hesitation.

Without a doubt these verses contain a reference to the Olympic Games, in which races were run before vast throngs for prizes of great value. A race under such circumstances and under the close observation of a vast crowd of spectators was a great inspiration and a tremendous challenge to the runners. The winner was crowned in triumph. His name was called in the streets. His father, his home, and his record were celebrated in song, and a statue was erected in his honor.

The Christian life is here represented as a race. The Christian is pictured as a runner competing for the prize. This is one of the Bible's most vivid pictures of the Christian life. A race must have a beginning, it must have progress, and it must have a goal. The beginning, however vigorous and promising, is not enough. It is the going on that counts. It is the finish that spells victory. Early in the last war Martin Niemöller, 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?"

Every Christian should strive to become a better Christian. Just as every one really interested in his profession or business strives to improve, so every Christian who is in a healthy spiritual state desires to become a better Christian. For each one who is striving to become a better Christian there are some wise and gracious counsels in this passage of scripture.

I. Refuse The Handicaps That Will Defeat You.

These handicaps are described under two heads:—

1. Weights.

"Let us lay aside every weight." There must be a divestment of all encumbrances. Everything that hinders must go. Every sensible athlete, who had any intention of running in a foot race, would lay aside everything that would in the slightest degree 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, and when the race is on he relieves himself of every encumbrance that he may win the coveted prize. A man in training must dispense with many things that are allowable to others. He must discipline himself in order to play well for the honor of his team and his school.

A weight denotes whatever would put one to a disadvantage in running. Things which prove to be weights to the Christian runner need not necessarily be sins. Even

things lawful may not be expedient. It is not a sin for an athlete to eat delicious candy and rich pastries, but doing 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 with his child in his arms. It is not a sin for me to participate in the business realm, but my doing so would be a weight to me. A weight may be entirely legitimate, nay, to others a blessing and a help; but, if to me it is an impediment in the race, I must lay it aside. It is a well-known fact that many capable men have minimized their influence because they have not laid aside every weight. Some followers of Christ avoid the things that are plainly sinful, but they carry a lot of excess baggage in the form of doubtful habits, or trifling interests, or second-best activities. This matter of weights takes us into the realm of living where the innocent thing 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 make everything contribute toward the victory. If anything does not make us stronger and more useful representatives of Jesus Christ, it is a weight that must be laid aside.

2. Sin.

"And the sin which doth so easily beset us." One must free himself from besetting sin. What is this sin that we must lay aside? 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 besets, is the sin of unbelief. This sin of unbelief is the very opposite of the grace of faith which was commended so highly in the preceding chapter. Sin always produces weakness. It saps the strength of the runner who is out to make a success of the race of life. Loyalty to God spells power and disloyalty to Him spells feebleness. To distrust God, to struggle against His will, or to doubt His promises always lands us in trouble. If we are to run successfully, we must lay aside sin, even such sins as a suspicious attitude, a critical spirit, and an irritable temper, an unforgiving spirit, and an evil habit. Youth 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. But each one is expected to overcome the sin to which he is most liable.

II. Realize The Helps That Will Advance You.

The track was measured, the starting point and the goal were fixed, the course was laid out, and over this course every runner had to run if he hoped to reach the goal and to win the prize. Running implied great exertion of bodily strength, progression, and perseverance.

The Christian life is a race that requires exertion. We must expect to put forth effort. We must expect to run in downright earnestness. We cannot be "carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease." Being a Christian is an exacting business. This race is set before us, and is marked out for us in the Word of God. Some things will help us tremendously in running this race:--

1. Maintaining 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 piece of work except for one thing--he ran in the wrong direction. In his confusion he lost sight of the right goal.

That is a parable of what may happen to any of us if we are not careful. It should help us all, however, to realize that Jesus Christ is always out there

ahead of us, giving us the right lead. If He doesn't give us complete answers to our particular problems, He at least gives us the direction in which those answers will be found. In this confidence we can say with David Livingstone, "I will go anywhere, provided it be forward!" Yes, keeping our sense of direction is decidedly a help if we are to win in the Christian life.

2. Understanding that the course is not easy.

"Let us run with patient endurance." From this expression we learn that the Christian way of life is not intended to be a perpetual picnic. It is an adventure with Jesus along a road with a thousand hurdles. It requires exertion. It demands stamina. It asks for perseverance.

The patience required of us is not the patience of those who stand in line and can do nothing whatever but just wait. It is rather the patience of the plodder who, against all weakness and opposition, persists in going on. The grace of patience is like the one rivet that binds all of the machinery together. The Lord wants staying power that will keep on until life's last breath.

Among the many beautiful pictures in the scripture gallery, there are some sad ones. There are portraits of men and women who started well in the service of the Lord, but they fell before some obstacle. Because they turned back, they had to be labeled quitters. And who 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."

By contrast take the case of Martin Luther. He had counted the cost of going on--yes, going all the way, with Christ. When he was ordered to appear before the authorities of the church at Worms and to explain why he had made such charges against his superiors, some of his advisers urged him not to go. They feared for his life. To this he replied: "To Worms I must go, And were there as many devils there as tiles on the roofs, yet would I enter into that city." There was iron in his blood, morally speaking. He was ready to take in stride the obstacles in the course of life which lay before him.

3. Remembering that you are part of a glorious company.

If I may use the language heard in athletic circles, you are playing on a great team! Isn't that what the author had in mind when he said, "Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses?" You might think that these witnesses are simply spectators, but you are mistaken. 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 are the people 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. Those consecrated 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, and 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 passed on. 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 already triumphed 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." Jesus Christ is the object of supreme interest, the answer to the deepest needs of our souls, and the dearest object of human love. We look to Him by trusting Him as our Saviour, copying Him as our pattern, and leaning upon Him for our strength.

Let me take you to a packed football stadium in Southern California. The University of Southern California is about to play its most important game of the season. It's a few years back, and on the team is an All-American by the name of Ed Smith. Only a few days ago 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 this afternoon's game. 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."