

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
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THE RACE SET BEFORE US

The New Testament frequently uses the imagery of the foot race to portray the Christian life. This imagery aptly represents various aspects of our salvation. God calls us to this race (Philippians 3:14). We train for this race (1 Timothy 4:7, 8). Our training entails strict self-control (1 Corinthians 9:25). Anyone who runs this race must compete according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5). There is a prize to be won (1 Corinthians 9:24), and anyone who seeks to win the prize must run with singular devotion, with one's eyes set on the prize who is Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

Erich Sauer develops this theme by first highlighting, "The author of the Hebrews letter declares that we should run with patience the race 'that is set before us' (Heb. 12:1). This does not only mean the race as lying before us from the viewpoint of time or, so to speak, space. What is meant is something dynamic. The race (Gk. *agon*) is 'set before us' as our *task*. It is our *duty* to run. The race is God-appointed (Gk. *prokeimenon*). The phrase *Prokeitai agon!* (Lat. *Propositum est certamen*), 'The battle lieth before!' was the usual Greek (answering to the Latin) expression for the race which was to be run, and which was publicly announced by a crier, together with the rules of the race and the prize. You cannot separate your own personal life of faith from being a runner in a race. God has appointed that you should *run*. True sanctification can be experienced practically only in a life of a Spirit-energized dynamic effort, and this effort involves our whole being, spirit, soul, and body. He who will not run in the race has from the very start abandoned the crown and the prize of victory. And as Satan, the great adversary, never admits being beaten until his final overthrow (Rev. 20:10), the battle and the race will never end for us until we have reached the goal of our course. This means that you must take your personal responsibility very seriously. You must reckon in confident faith with the victorious powers of Christ the Saviour. But on the other hand, do not overlook the reality of the enemy. Weigh seriously all the paralyzing powers which emanate from him. Concentrate on the goal. Live in the holy energy of a consecrated life. We can never make peace with sin. Never forget that a real life of faith means a running in the race. Remember: 'And if also a man contend in the games, he is not crowned, except he have contended lawfully' (2 Tim. 2:5). The new birth is not the finishing-post but the starting-post. If you would reach the finishing-post, you must *run*.¹

- I. **Consider the Saints.** "Our author, writes Hughes, "pictures himself and his readers as competitors who, as they contend for the faith in the arena of life, are *surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*, namely, those champions of faith and perseverance of earlier generations, crowded as it were row upon row within the encircling amphitheatre. If these are witnesses in the sense of spectators, as the imagery implies, it is even more important to understand that they are witnesses in the sense of those who have proved themselves to be unflinching professors of the faith and have overcome by the word of their testimony (see Rev. 12:11). They are 'the glorious company of martyrs,' faithful in

their witness both in life and even unto death. (Though the term *martyr* does not in the New Testament have the particular meaning of one who has sealed his witness with his blood that it later came to have, many of those in this cloud of witnesses were, as we have noticed above, martyrs in this later sense.) They have triumphantly completed their course, and we who are now contestants in the arena should be inspired by their example to give of our utmost in the struggle.”²

II. Consider Ourselves. Two specific things are underscored.

“*Hindrance.* ‘Let us throw off everything that hinders,’ writes the author. He looks at the clothes we wear and the physical condition we are in. When we run a race, we dress in suitable sportswear designed to provide minimum weight and maximum comfort. And to qualify as runners, we strive to lose extra body fat by strengthening our muscles. That which is bulky in our bodies must disappear, for it hinders us in the race that we run. What are the impediments that hinder us? Jesus says, ‘Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life’ (Luke 21:34). Paul instructs, ‘But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips’ (Col. 3:8; also see James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1).

“*Sin.* A hindrance in itself is not a sin, but because it impedes a contestant a hindrance can become sin. Sin entangles, much as a flowing robe that reaches down to the ground would entangle a runner in ancient times. Put this impediment aside, says the author of Hebrews. ‘Let us strip off anything that slows us down or holds us back, and especially those sins that wrap themselves so tightly around our feet and trip us up.’ The writer is rather specific. He calls sin *the* sin. What does he mean? He refrains from answering this question, but other passages of Scripture suggest that the sin of covetousness ranks chief among man’s transgressions. Remember that Eve fell into sin because she *desired* to gain wisdom (Gen. 3:6). The last commandment in the Decalogue forbids covetousness (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). And this commandment actually serves as a summary to point out that the preceding commandments implicitly are directed against man’s covetousness. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul calls evil desires and greed idolatry (3:5; also see Eph. 4:22). Even though the author of Hebrews refers to *the* sin, he himself leaves the precise meaning an open question. The intent of his exhortation is that we ought to avoid sin, for it impedes our movement in the race that we must run.”³

III. Consider Jesus. As contestants engaged in running the race, we have no time to look around. We must keep our eyes focused on Jesus and must do so without distraction. The writer of Hebrews does not place the name Jesus among those of the heroes of faith; he gives him special recognition, for he calls him “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus is “the author of [our] salvation” (2:10), who as forerunner has entered the heavenly sanctuary (6:19-20) and has opened “a new and living way” for us that leads to this sanctuary (10:20). He is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 1:17; 21:6; 22:13). And he whom God perfected through suffering (Heb. 2:10) perfects his brothers and sisters who have placed their trust in him. As originator and perfecter of our faith, Jesus has laid its foundation in our hearts and in time brings faith to completion. He can do this because he is able, and he will do this because he is our brother (Heb. 2:11-12). In a similar vein, Paul encourages the Philippians when he says that God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (1:6). The expression “turn your eyes upon Jesus” comes from the Greek word *aphorao* – to look away from one thing to another. In verse three, we are told to “consider Him,” which comes from the Greek word *analogizomai*, literally to consider intently. In Heb. 3:1, we are told to “consider Jesus” – here the Greek word is *katanoesate*, which means to fix the mind on. In all three cases, the stress is on mental concentration. Spurgeon declares,

“The Greek word for ‘looking’ is a much fuller word than we can find in the English language. It has a preposition in it which turns the look away from everything else. You are to look from all beside to Jesus. Fix not your gaze upon the cloud of witnesses; they will hinder you if they take away your eyes from Jesus. Look not on the weights and the besetting sin – these you have laid aside; look away from them. Do not even look upon the racecourse, or the competitors, but look to Jesus, and so start in the race. What have you to trust to but His blood and righteousness? Beware that you set up nothing as a rival confidence. Look off from everything you have ever relied upon in days gone by, and say to your soul, ‘None but Jesus.’ You must have a single eye and a single hope. ‘Christ is all,’ and He must be all to you, or you are out of the race altogether.”⁴

CONCLUSION: Fred Sanders helpfully observes, “We are at all times to ‘[look to] Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith’ (Heb. 12:2). But we are to look to him in a way that lets us see him situated in his relationships to the Father who sent him and the Spirit whom he sends. Unless we see Jesus in this way, we fail to see him as who he actually is. The consequences are inevitably confusion and a loss of spiritual power, usually brought about by substituting Jesus into a role that ought to be filled by the other persons of the Trinity.”⁵ There is a very real danger that we face as Christians and that is the danger of living like practical atheists. The Bible describes the folly of the person who *says* “there is no God” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Practical atheism does not *say* there is no God. Rather, the practical atheist *loves* as if there were no God. The practical atheist is guilty of the heinous sin of forgetting the God it professes to believe in. This, I say again, is a grave danger we all face. “How prone we are to limit and circumscribe the sphere in which we practically allow for God! We feel His presence and activity in some things but not in others; we seek His blessing in some matters but not in others; we look for His guidance in some affairs, but not in others; we can trust Him in some crises and with some of our hopes, but not in or with others. This too is a practical theism. And it is against all such practical atheism that our passage enters its protest. It protests against men living as if they were the builders of their own houses, the architects of their own fortunes. It protests against men reckoning in anything without God.”⁶ I close with these words of wisdom from Lee Irons, a friend and graduate from Westminster Seminary. “Whether or not you are into New Year’s resolutions, consider making this year a year in which you develop a closer relationship with Christ. By that I don’t (merely) mean that you will study the Bible more, attend church more faithfully, work on some besetting sin, or strive to be a better father/mother, husband/wife, employee/boss, etc. These are all good and necessary things, but a person can do them and still not be any closer to Christ. Moralism is not a substitute for spirituality. By developing a closer relationship with Christ I mean talking with him about your life, your problems, your anxieties, and your hopes. Laying before him your difficult relationships. Appealing to him for strength in the battle for personal holiness and for fulfilling your responsibilities. Asking him to guide you in your decisions. Reaching out to him in your times of need. Personal Bible reading and attendance on the public means of grace play a role in this, for it is as you get to know Christ better through the word and sacraments that you grow in Christ. You can only have a personal relationship with someone you know, and you can only know who Jesus is through the Scriptures. But – it is possible for someone to know a lot of doctrinal facts about Christ and yet not have a living relationship with him. As Reformed people, that is a constant danger for all of us. We are always in danger of becoming Pharisees, a people who honors the Lord with our lips, but our hearts are far from him (Matthew 15:8).”⁷

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Erich Sauer, *In The Arena of Faith: A Call to The Consecrated Life* (Eerdmans, 1955), p. 68.
- ² Philip E. Hughes, *Commentary on The Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 519.
- ³ Simon Kistemaker, *Hebrews: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1984), p. 366.
- ⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Rule of The Race* (The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit), Vol. 34. www.spurgeongems.org.
- ⁵ Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How The Trinity Changes Everything* (Crossway, 2010), p. 169.
- ⁶ R. P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and The Christian's Liberty* (Zondervan, 1972), p. 45.
- ⁷ [http://www.upper-register.com/blog/Jan. 1, 2008](http://www.upper-register.com/blog/Jan.1,2008).