

Sunday AM
November 13, 2005

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ above all Things

Finishing First
Hebrews 11:39-12:2

Introduction:

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. ¹

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Few passages in the NT jump off the pages of Scripture like this one. This passage is clearly a motivational passage aimed at keeping you and me running the race to the finish. All those who start the race must finish – no one may fall or fail. Therefore, motivation is needed in order to run the race with perseverance.

The main point of our text in 12:1-2 is RUN with endurance. Run with the intent of winning. Do not be content to simply be in the race. Run to win. You must desire to obtain the prize. So the main point of this text is the command – “Let us run with endurance the race set before us.” It is time to get serious about the race – to get serious about your Christian life.

How does a Christian run with endurance? What kinds of things need to be done in order to take the Christian life seriously? There are two other verbs in this text that relate to the main verb “to run.” They are verbs called attendant circumstance. In other words, if the action of the main verb is going to be carried out, there is other action that must attend that circumstance. If you are going to run with endurance – if you are going to run with an eye to winning the prize, then two other actions need to accompany your running, namely, you must throw off the encumbrances that weigh you down and secondly, you must get rid of all the evil that may disqualify you. You see this in v. 1, “Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run.” Notice the word “also.” If you are going to run with endurance, you must also do these two other things.

1. Get rid of encumbrances – Don’t be distracted.
2. Get rid of evil – Don’t be disqualified.

Read your text very carefully and notice that these are two different categories, two different actions. One thing you do away with is sin and the second thing you do away with is dead weight that is not sin but that which may hinder you from running.

Pizza, pop and pie are not banned substances that disqualify an Olympic athlete but they are substances he has willfully chosen to abandon because they do not help him run with endurance. The athlete chooses to sacrifice that which is otherwise allowed so that he may run with singular devotion to obtaining a gold medal.

Oh Christian, how much of your sluggishness is due to all the dead weight you enter into during the week that may not be sin but it sure is not helpful. What do you spend your time reading, watching,

listening to, seeing or who do you spend too much time with that does not make your mind more heavenly minded but weighs you down and starts to tie you to this world? If you are going to run with endurance and run with a desire to win – if you are going to get serious about the race – if you are going to get serious about the Christian life, then you may need to cut some things out. You may need to break away from some relationships. You may need to change some habits and entertainment, etc.

A few years ago, I learned a valuable principle that has begun to revolutionize my Christian race. Up to that point a few years ago I was accustomed to asking the question, “What is wrong with this?” What is wrong with this music? What is wrong with this movie? What is wrong with this outfit? Until I came across Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:12, “All things are lawful for me but not all things are profitable . . . I will not be brought under the power of any of them.” It was then that I realized that I was mastered by my appetites. I wanted the music. I wanted the movies, etc. But I learned that I was asking the wrong question – not, what is wrong with these things? (that answer is nothing) but, what is profitable about these things? (that answer is also nothing).

Here is how I have come to state that question on a daily basis in my life – How does this activity maximize my pursuit of God? If it is not maximum use then it is cumbersome. Cut it off and streamline so that I can run with endurance. If it does not aid my moving forward in greater faith, in greater love, in greater joy, in greater humility, in greater purity, then it is an obstacle in my race. How does this activity help me run the race?

Jonathan Edwards lived by such a rule that he wrote his famous list of resolutions so that he would be streamlined in his running. Likewise, Paul says that Christians need to be about “redeeming (making the best use of) the time because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). It is time to get serious about the race.

Just asking, “What is wrong with this?” makes you a minimalist Christian. “What is the minimum standard I have to honor to be a Christian and still hold on to the world?” I am growing increasingly weary with being in myself and being around others who are minimalist Christians. I want to be a maximum Christian who will undergo great sacrifices so as to maximize my pursuit of God.

Secondly, if you are going to run with endurance and have a singular desire for winning the prize then you must not engage in any activity that will disqualify you. “Let us lay aside the sin that clings so closely (haunts us, perhaps) and let us run.” This action is obvious and most of you live your lives here. Let me share with you one passage that drove the apostle Paul. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 says,
 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercise self-control in all things. (I think that corresponds to laying aside encumbrances) They do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

Getting serious about the race means fighting sin!

But I said at the beginning that this passage is all about motivation. What kinds of motivation does the writer give me that will keep me running with endurance?

I see four motives – two that precede the command and two that follow it.

The cloud of witnesses

Who are they and what does their witnessing mean? They are the saints that have lived and died so valiantly by faith in chapter 11. Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and all those who suffered and died, "of whom the world was not worthy."

But what does their "witnessing" refer to? Does it refer to their watching us from heaven? Or does it refer their witnessing to us by their lives? The word "witness" can have either meaning: the act of seeing something, or the act of telling something. Which is it here? I think it is the act of telling. The verb form of this word "witness" (*martureo*) is used five times in Hebrews 11 (2, 4 [twice], 5, 39) and always refers to the giving of a (confirming) testimony rather than the mere watching of an event. So I take the witnesses of Hebrews 12:1 to be the saints who have run the race before us, and have gathered, as it were, along the marathon route to say, through the testimony of their lives, "By faith I finished, you can too!"

The best way to illustrate this, I think, is with Hebrews 11:4, where the writer speaks of Abel and says, "Through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks." So Abel is in the cloud of witnesses, and he is witnessing to us by his life through the Scriptures. This is the way all the witnesses of Hebrews 11 are helping us. They have gathered along the sidelines of our race and they hold out their wounds and their joys and give us the best high-fives we ever got: "Go for it! You can do it. By faith you can finish. You can lay the weights down and the sins. By faith, by the assurance of better things hoped for, you can do it. I did it. And I know it can be done. Run. RUN!"

Second, It is all for one and one for all. This is the motivation that comes from vv. 39-40. "And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect." This is followed in 12:1 by "therefore . . . let us run." The "therefore" means that the motivation for running comes from vv. 39-40. Since this is true, RUN! What is the motivation?

I take verse 39 to mean that when the believers in the Old Testament died, their spirits were made whole and perfect (as 12:23 says), but that they do not receive the full blessing of God's promise, which is resurrection with new bodies in a glorious new age with all God's enemies removed and righteousness holding sway and the earth filled with the glory of God. They did not receive that promise yet.

Why not? Why must the saints wait, without their new resurrection bodies? The answer is given in verse 40: "Because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect." In other words, God's purpose is that all his people - all the redeemed - be gathered in before any of them enjoys the fullness of his promise. His purpose is that we all come into the fullness of our inheritance together.

So the motivation is this: Your finishing the race is what history is waiting for. We must all finish together. The entire consummation of the plan of the universe awaits the gathering in of every single one of God's elect. All those who have lived by faith wait. And they crowd the side of the track urging you on. They cannot be perfected without you, nor can you be perfected without them. Then one day, the trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will be raised first and those who are alive and remain will be caught up to join them in the air (1 Cor. 15) – and as one single unit we will be presented as a glorious church crossing the line together.

The last two motives are related. They appear together in the text: "looking unto Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith." Look to Jesus. The word the writer uses here for "look" means "to look away

from everything else and to fix your eyes on one thing.” Which means, as you ponder the things in your life that you should cut out, or as you determine to run the race so as to win the prize, you must do so by looking away from everything else and fixing your gaze on Christ. First, look to Christ with singular devotion. He is the pioneer of your faith, the author of your faith. Christ laid hold of your heart for faith. Christ chose you to run the race so that you run to him as the prize. Don’t let anything distract you from that singular devotion.

Second, Christ is the strength. Christ is the perfecter of your faith. Christ is the one who not only laid hold of your heart for faith but he is bringing it along in faith. Which means, faith lays hold on Jesus for help because Jesus laid hold on your heart for faith. Looking away from all other resources in order to look at Christ means you run with a singular dependence on Christ. You trust Christ alone to bring you to the finish line. He is the finisher of your faith as well as the founder. Christ is the perfecter of your faith as well as the pioneer. That is motivation enough is it not? Christ runs not only with me but for me. I run the race by the strength which he supplies. 13:21 says, “Now may the God of peace equip you with everything good so that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Conclusion:

Church, let us run the race set before us with a singular desire to win.

- Let us lay aside every evil that might disqualify us.
- Let us lay aside every encumbrance that might distract us.
- Let us run looking at the cloud of witnesses desiring to live out our lives by faith and finish with them.
- Let us run looking to Christ with singular devotion and with singular dependence.

“Lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame . . . may be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and [strive] for holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; [See to it] that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; [see to it] that no one is sexually immoral or unholy” (12:12-16).

“Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, because our God is a consuming fire” (12:28-29).