

“Let’s Run In God’s Race”
(Hebrews 12:1-3)

by Daniel L. Akin

I believe if the Bible were being written today we would find in it illustrations from football, basketball and baseball; golf, tennis, track and field. Why? Because when you come to the Bible you discover that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of Scripture to draw from athletics to illustrate the Christian life. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:27 and 2 Corinthians 4:9 the Christian life is like a boxing match. In Ephesians 6:12 he compares it to a wrestling match. In Hebrews 12:1-3 God’s Word says the life of the believer is like a race. I believe the author of Hebrews had in mind a very particular race: the marathon, a 26-mile 385-yard race. Such a race requires both training and strategy if it is to be run well. What are the particulars to which we must give attention?

First, **we must find encouragement as we run.** In Hebrews 12:1 the author says “since **we** are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” He includes himself with those to whom he is writing. He further notes “a cloud of witnesses,” a reference, I believe to the great “hall of Faith” of chapter 11. As one surveys the witnesses of the marvelous chapter, two avenues of encouragement are discovered.

- 1) **We should be encouraged by the earthly winners.** In Hebrews 11:32-35a, no less than 10 incredible feats of faith are catalogued, things like shutting the mouths of lions, becoming mighty in battle and seeing the dead raised to life again. This is supernatural stuff anyway you look at it. We should be encouraged by these champions of the faith.

2) **We should be encouraged by the heavenly winners.** Paul Harvey reminds us to always read “the rest of the story,” and in Hebrews 11:35b – 38 we discover a different group who ran a very different kind of race. Torture, mockings, prison, and the sword was their lot. Yet in Hebrews 11:39 we discover, “all these obtained a good testimony through faith.” Earthly victors and heavenly victors both serve as a wonderful source of encouragement as we run in the race God has specifically designed for us.

Second, **we must focus on the essential as we run.** Again in Hebrews 12:1, three specific guidelines are provided that will enable us to run well in God’s race.

- 1) **Run cleanly.** The Bible says, “let us lay aside every weight.” Weights are encumbrances, stuff, excess baggage that can slow us down and keep us from running our best for Jesus. Interestingly, weights may not always be bad things. Sometimes a weight can be a “good thing,” but it is not the “best thing.” As devoted disciples of Jesus, we must not settle for good. We must strive for the best.
- 2) **Run with confidence.** Not only are we to lay aside every weight, we must also set aside “the sin which so easily ensnares us.” I like to refer to this as the “octopus” of the Christian life whose tentacles can wrap around us so tightly we can hardly run at all. Because of the context of this passage (remember Hebrews 11 precedes Hebrews 12), I believe the sin God has in mind is the same sin for everyone: the sin of unbelief. Hebrews 11:6 reminds us, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” Unbelief is an attitude of the heart which says for me to stay in the race I need God + _____.

Once we add a plus sign to the equation it does not matter how we fill in the blank. We have stepped into the realm of unbelief. Job said, “Though He [God] slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). We must run in confidence. We must run in faith.

- 3) **We should run consistently.** Verse 1 concludes by challenging us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us.” The word “endurance” also can be translated “steadfastness” or “perseverance.” It means to run without throwing in the towel or dropping out of the race. God specifically designs a particular race for each of us. What is important is not how fast we run, but how long we run. You see, it is not enough to begin well. It is crucial that we continue and finish well. These are the essentials we must focus on as we run in God’s race.

Third, and perhaps most important, **we must follow the example as we run.** In Hebrews 12:2-3 we are provided the ultimate example as we run in God’s race: the Lord Jesus. The author of Hebrews challenges us in two ways to follow after Jesus.

- 1) **Look at Him.** “Looking unto Jesus” is a challenge to look to Jesus and only Jesus. It means to have eyes for no one or no thing but Him. The rationale for this kind of radical devotion is clearly laid out: he is “the author and finisher of faith” (“our” is an interpretive addition). He is faith’s pioneer and perfecter, its beginning and end. From A – Z it is all about Him. Why should we believe Jesus is sufficient for such an assignment? Again the text provides the answer. Jesus ran a race. God designed a race tailor-made for His Son which our Lord gladly embraced. “Who for the joy that was **set before him**

(paralleling the last phrase of 12:1) endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus ran a race that took Him to a cross but ended at a throne. He joyfully embraced the Father’s will in providing redemption for sinners, counting the shame of it as nothing, and His Father has appropriately honored Him with the place of greatest prestige and position. But there is one thing more.

2) **Think about Him.** Verse 3 says “consider him.” The word means to meditate or reflect upon. “Consider Him who **endured** (the key word in our text. It appears in all 3 verses tying this passage together) such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.” Sometimes the race is tough and the obstacles almost too much to bear. When the thought of quitting or walking away begins to harass us, we need to get our spiritual eyes and mind back on target: we need to bring it all back to Jesus.

When it comes to running in God’s race, living faithfully the Christian life, it is imperative that we keep our eyes on Jesus. Indeed, anything in life that gets our eyes off of Jesus is, without question, not of God. On this truth we must clearly stand. On this truth we will also run.