



Running the Race with Eyes on Jesus Hebrews 12

Introduction

Dr. J. Vernon Magee outlines Hebrews 11-13:

Faith - Hebrews 11

Hope - Hebrews 12

Love - Hebrews 13

Faith is obviously the theme of Hebrews 11, which is a grand illustration of *the just shall live by faith* (Hebrews 10:38). Hebrews 13 closes the book on a love theme. In between the two is chapter 12 which is full of hope, although less obviously so. Hebrews 12 is about running the race which is set before us.

Outline of Hebrews Chapter 12

- I. Object of the Race - Hebrews 12:1-4
- II. Discipline of the Race - Hebrews 12:5-11
- III. Obstacles in the Race - Hebrews 12:12-17
- IV. On the Right Course in the Race - Hebrews 12:18-29

I. Object of the Race - Hebrews 12:1-4

A. Life is Like a Race

Shakespeare likened life to a stage on which we are all players. The Bible likens life to a race. Life has a course with a beginning, middle, and end. Others may run the course alongside us but each person runs his or her own race. Nor are we competing with anyone else, only with our own potential in Christ.

Discipline is necessary in order to run with dignity and consistency. There are obstacles along the way and an outcome at the end. The results will be posted and prizes awarded. John Bunyan's great classic, Pilgrim's Progress, develops this theme most dramatically as Pilgrim travels his course. The Apostle Paul uses the race imagery also, *It is not of him who wills or runs, but of God who shows mercy* (Romans 9:16). *Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it* (1 Corinthians 9:24). *Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty* (1 Corinthians 9:26). *Lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain* (Galatians 2:2). *I press toward the goal for the prize* (Philippians 3:14).

Peter, too, said, *Gird up the loins of your mind* (1 Peter 1:13), as for a race. Sports and athletics were prominent in the Greek and Roman world and earlier; even the psalmist says the sun is *like a strong man to run its race* (Psalm 19:5). This chapter is still wonderfully current and relevant to us today.

B. The Witnesses - Hebrews 12:1

1. Identifying the witnesses

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Who are these witnesses? Are they saints in heaven, our family, our Sunday School teacher, Martin Luther, John Calvin, etc., observing our steps and missteps? Are they angels and other ethereal beings looking down on us? Are we constantly on display for all the unseen world to see? Most of us hope not. Let us examine this.

2. The Therefore clue

What is *therefore* there for? It refers back to the heroes of Hebrews 11. *We also* would seem to include us with them. If there were no chapter break there would be no question as to the identity of the witnesses. Part of the problem is in our way of thinking of the word "witness". We think right away of someone observing something (in this case, observing us). But these witnesses are no observers, they are participants who have entered into their rest, not gone into the grandstand to watch us participate. (This would be less than restful.) They are those heroes and heroines who have witnessed to faith's reality and to the value of God's promises. They are not witnesses OF US, they are witnesses TO HIM.

We are *surrounded by* them in the sense that they are part of the unseen world. They are there for our example and encouragement.

C. The Weights - Hebrews 12:1b

1. Circumstances – *every weight*

Some weights are beneficial in training; they exercise particular muscles. But when it is time to run the race, all must be laid aside toward winning. Many a world class runner began life handicapped. Their "weight" may have been an accident, as in Glenn Cunningham's case, a Christian who was badly burned while saving his little brother from a school house fire and who was told he would never walk again. But through practice and determination, he went on to set the indoor mile record. He is considered by many to be the greatest miler of all time.

Born into poverty in 1913, Jesse Owen's grandparents had been slaves. He was the youngest of 10 children and often had pneumonia as a child. When he was five years old, his mother cut a fibrous tumor the size of a golf ball from his chest. Before that she had removed another tumor from his leg. There was no money for

doctors. Jesse survived in answer to his parent's fervent prayers. He went on to set three NCAA records while at Ohio State and win four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics (Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics, Jeremy Schaap).

Wilma Rudolph was born prematurely and weighed in at just 4.5 pounds. She had polio as a child and was told to forget being a runner for she would never run again. However, she went on to win three gold medals at the 1960 Olympic Games and set the world record in 1961 for the 100 meter dash. She was considered the fastest woman in the world in the 1960's.

These athletes had "weights" most of us do not have. Yet those weights which seemed disastrous were turned to assets. First, however, they had to be overcome and laid aside.

The weights in Hebrews 12 refer to sets of circumstances which, when given to the Lord, can be turned to assets. They need not handicap us in the race. Will you turn your circumstances over to the One who allowed them, confessing any bitterness, envy, or anger? Will you trust Him to turn it all to good for you, then leave the results to Him?

2. Sin - the sin which so easily ensnares us

The greatest weight of all is the weight of sin. David said as a result of his sin, *Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me* (Psalm 32:4). In Pilgrim's Progress, when Pilgrim arrived at the cross, he felt the burden of the sin he had carried for so long roll off him. He experienced freedom from it for the first time.

We are born with the weight of sin and it accumulates each day as we grow old enough to make our own choices. Sin brings with it mental, physical, and emotional defects, compensating behaviors, hostile attitudes, poor adjustments to life, and tendencies to various addictions, such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, and more. Sin is rebellion against God, parents, government, and authority. Sin lowers our self-esteem and raises our defenses. Sin sets us up for failure so that our greatest glories turn to ashes and our dreams vanish in the cold light of reality. Sin depresses us from within and oppresses us from without.

3. Laying aside the weight of sin

The most important thing you will ever do is get rid of your weight of sin. The effect on your own life as well as other lives is extraordinary. Sin rolls off at the cross. Sin must be acknowledged and confessed to the Lord. *If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

Sin must be named. For instance, put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth (Colossians 3:8). Our sin is exchanged for our faith in Christ, *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows* (Isaiah 53:4), *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree* (1 Peter 2:24).

Lastly, sin needs to be counted gone. *Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God* (Romans 6:11). Have you done each of these three things and exchanged your sin for faith in Christ? Have you acknowledged and confessed your sin? Have you made a clean break with your sins by naming them to God and taking His forgiveness and cleansing? Have you counted your sins gone, buried with Christ forever, to be no part of your new life in Him?

D. Looking Unto Jesus - Hebrews 12:2-4

1. Author and finisher of our faith

Jesus is the object of the race. He is our goal, as He was Paul's, *That I might know Him* (Philippians 3:10). Looking at Him by faith strengthens, motivates, and inspires us. It keeps us running the race when we would falter. He is also our example for He, too, fixed His gaze on the goal above and beyond the present trial.

2. For the joy that was set before Him

We need to keep the broad, eternal perspective. Remember the last chapter? Remember that we win! Keep your eyes on the goal.

3. Endured the cross

The race is not easy. Jesus said there is a cross for us to take up daily. He went to the Cross so that He could rise and be able to say, *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:20). He is with you in your race.

4. Despising the shame

To be hung on a cross was shameful, but Christ refused to say that the cross was bad. He gave the cross dignity so that whereas once it was despicable, now it is respected. The cross adorns cathedrals and churches everywhere. It is also worn as jewelry.

5. Sat down on God's right hand

God the Father has elevated Jesus the Son to an exalted position. He will elevate us, too, to share His glory if we are willing to share His cross (John 17:22-24).

6. *Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners*

Jesus has suffered what we suffer. As we contemplate his suffering before Pilate, accused unjustly by His own people, betrayed by His friend and disciple, physical abuse at his trial, and agony of the cross will embolden us in trials. Jesus shed His blood and gave His life to take away our sin. We have not yet gone so far as martyrdom.

II. Discipline of the Race - Hebrews 12:5-11

A. Sonship – Hebrews 12:5-6

The evidence that a child is valued and loved is the discipline used by the parents for the child's ultimate good. Parents (usually) do not discipline the neighbors' kids. They send them home. But their own child they work with, and work on, for a desired result.

Once my child was sitting with another child in church prayer meeting. They began to play and laugh noisily so I moved and sat between them. My child began to cry so I took her out of the service, walking up a long aisle with her crying loudly. I made no attempt to discipline the other parents' child and have no idea how they handled the situation. I felt responsible only for my own. So God takes responsibility for us and allows life to be hard for us sometimes so that we learn valuable lessons, learn self control, and exhibit His Fatherhood.

B. Endure Hardship – Hebrews 12:7-9

Hardships and suffering are difficult to endure and understand. Our part is to make it through the trial, "not somehow but triumphantly". We need to say, "This is hard but, by the grace of God, I can do it." Through His grace He promises strength for today. Tomorrow there will be strength for that day too. Whether the hardship is due to our own sin or is unrelated and inexplicable, we can accept it from God and trust His love in allowing it. Job is in the Bible because we need his example to understand that God allows godly, innocent people to suffer, even sometimes at the hands of those they thought were their friends.

C. The Result – Righteousness – Hebrews 12:10-11

Afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (12:12). God is making us fruitful. He will go to any lengths to make us fruitful. He is also conforming us to the image of His Son, our Lord (Romans 8:29). I cannot speak for you, but I have a long way to go and He is working on me all the time. It takes much constant discipline to produce a champion and God wants all His children

to be champions. Does He have your co-operation in making you the best you can be?

III. Obstacles in the Race - Hebrews 12:12-17

A. Feeble Arms and Weak Knees - Hebrews 12:12-13

We need our arms and knees for work. Sometimes they are feeble for various reasons. Whether these are your own knees and arms or the knees and arms of others in the body of Christ, they need strengthening.

Do you ever wonder why so many Christians are so feeble and have no power to do anything for God? God means for the lame to be healed and not eliminated from the race. We should have a like attitude. Often when we are tempted to drop out someone says or does something to renew our courage. We who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak. Whom can you strengthen today? Who needs encouragement, a kind word, a smile, a cheery note, a hug?

B. Being sidetracked - Hebrews 12:14

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. It is easy to be sidetracked in a long race. The writer reminds us of our course, giving encouragement to stay on it.

C. Root of Bitterness - Hebrews 12:15

One of the greatest obstacles in the race is bitterness. It may account for more dropouts than any other single factor because it is contagious. A root of bitterness is often deeply hidden and needs to be discovered and dealt with permanently. Have you ever bought a basket of strawberries which looked fresh and beautiful only to find, when you got home, that there was a rotten one in the bottom. Did you notice that wherever that rotten strawberry touched the others, it caused *many* to *become defiled*? This is a picture of what bitterness does. Will you search your heart for bitterness and confess it so it may be removed?

D. Sensuality and Godlessness - Hebrews 12:16-17

1. Esau as an Example – 12:16

Esau was the firstborn twin of Rebekah and Isaac (Genesis 25:24-25). The birthright would be his. But for one bite of food he sold it. He is called in Hebrews a *fornicator* and *profane person*. He despised his birthright (Genesis 25:34), like many today. Unfortunately Esau had no appreciation for spiritual values or even higher values. He lived at the sensual level, gratifying whatever desire he felt. Appearing to be a "free spirit", he was

actually a slave to his appetites. He did not believe in consequences. Later, when he expected to at least receive the blessing, he found he was rejected. He had disqualified himself. *Do not be deceived God is not mocked; whatever a man sows that he will also reap* (Galatians 6:7).

2. Esau's tears of Regret - 12:17

He found no place for repentance though he sought it diligently with tears. He cried over his loss and wished the outcome were different, but there was no real repentance, no self examination, no change of values nor seeking after God. God would have forgiven him but what he had done could not be undone.

Which of these obstacles is slowing your race? Is it feebleness and no power, being sidetracked by things that do not lead to peace and holiness? Is it bitterness concerning a wrong or a person? Or is it sensuality which is the sin of our age, or some other obstacle? Would you pause now to name your obstacle to God and ask Him to remove it from your race?

IV. On the Right Course in the Race - Hebrews 12:18-29

A. Two Mountains as Alternatives – Hebrews 12:18-24

It would be terrible to get to the end of the race and find you were on the wrong course. Chapter twelve ends with two mountains that represent two opposite courses. The Bible mentions several logical alternatives that are mutually exclusive. *I have set before you life and death...therefore choose life* (Deuteronomy 30:19). *Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve* (Joshua 24:15). *Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house upon a rock. Everyone who hears these sayings of Mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand* (Matthew 7:24-26). The writer of Hebrews describes two mountains - the one we have *not come to* and the one *we have come to*.

B. Mount Sinai - Hebrews 12:18-21

Though the mountain is not named, the sevenfold description is unmistakable. Mount Sinai is where Moses received the law for Israel. It represents that to which the persecuted Hebrew Christians wished to return.

1. May be touched - the reference is to the physical and material, in opposition to Mount Zion.

2. Burned with fire - awesome and frightening
3. Blackness, darkness and tempest - awesome sights
4. Sound of a trumpet and the voice of words - awesome sounds
5. Begged that no further word should be spoken - awesome occurrence
6. People could not endure what was commanded - overwhelming
7. Even Moses feared and quaked - Exodus 19:16, 18; Deuteronomy 9:19. *If so much as a beast touches the mountain it shall be stoned.* The writer reminds them of God's awesomeness and unapproachability under the old covenant.

C. Mount Zion - Hebrews 12:22-24

The description of this mountain is eight-fold.

1. It is our rightful course - *But you have come to Mount Zion.*
2. It is *the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*
3. There are *an innumerable company of angels.*
4. There is found *the general assembly and church of the firstborn.* Their names are *written in heaven.* This assurance was not guaranteed to those under the first covenant. Only in the light of the new covenant can we say with the hymn writer, "There's a new name written down in glory and it's mine, O yes, it's mine" (C. Austin Miles).
5. There is found *God the Judge of all.* Even though the new covenant is one of grace not law, God's character remains consistent throughout both covenants.
6. There are found *the spirits of just men made perfect.* One day this will describe you and me who are in Christ. (Editor's note—This phrase is now descriptive of Pearl Hamilton, the writer of these lessons.)
7. There is found *Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant.*
8. And there is found *the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.* This brings us full circle from Hebrews 11 where Abel is the first mentioned hero of faith.

D. Final Danger - Deserting - Hebrews 12:25-27

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. The ultimate sin is to refuse God's words for they are the words of eternal life and salvation (John 6:63). *He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life* (John 5:24). The readers were in danger of deserting the race.

Previously His voice shook only Mount Sinai and that was terrifying. How much more terrifying is the prophecy that God will one day shake the earth and everything physical and material in it (Isaiah 34:4; Joel 2:31; Matthew 24:29; 2 Peter 3:10). Are you secure from that day because your faith is in Christ?

E. The Reward - the Kingdom _ Hebrews 12:28

Jesus' kingdom is the reward for running the race. At present we are received into the kingdom but some day we will receive a kingdom. *Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:10) is what the writer is saying.

Endure the hardships and difficulties, the slander and persecution, the threats and loss. We are going to receive a kingdom that can never be lost. Therefore let us take the grace available to us to serve God acceptably.

F. *Our God is a Consuming Fire* - Hebrews 12:29

The readers are reminded that they will have to encounter the same awesome God as encountered by their fearful forefathers. Going back is really not an option because there is nothing there to which to return. God is the God of the new covenant and He is the same God as in the past. It is our relationship to Him that is different than what was available under the first covenant. Our position is far superior. We relate to Mount Zion, reminder of David's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, where we are under God's grace and not under God's law.

Applications

1. Will you check to see that you are in the right race and on the grace course? Are you struggling to somehow run on both tracks, putting yourself under the law although God has shown you His grace through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ? Will you put your trust in Christ alone rather than in any works that you can do?
2. Are you bringing others into the kingdom of grace or are you trying to put them under some bondage or other legalistic requirements? Is Jesus Christ the object of your race so that you run with your eyes on Him only?
3. What entangling weight to a successful race will you lay aside today forever?