

## **SERMON TITLE: Running the Race**

An encouragement to perseverance

Preached by Brad Collins on 6 May, 2007

### INTRODUCTION

You might not be a sports fan or have ever tried to run in a race, yet right now we are all taking part in a race, we are striving in a battle, which is more important than any sporting event we can watch on television or participate in. In a race of any considerable distance there are many places that you could find yourself participating in. First, there is the well conditioned athlete, poised at the front of the crowd ready to take off and lead the pack to the prize. Next, there are other well trained yet amateur athletes who consistently progress along the race and because they have trained well they look to be sure finishers. Behind these we have the less prepared. These people struggle, stop along the way and even drift so far back they may lose their way. One thing I can say about all of these people though is that are at least involved in the race, for we cannot forget that there is another group not running in this race. While this passage does not directly speak to this group and I will not be highlighting their case today, I will make brief mention of them for if, during the sermon, you feel more a part of the crowd looking in on the race rather than running, there is a remedy for your convicted soul and it lies at the foot of the Cross. With that being said, instead of focusing on that group of people, my hope is for the Spirit to bring forth from the scriptures those things that encourage and strengthen our run so that those that are running today can continue to progress forward towards the prize which Christ has purchased for us through His sacrifice.

Who is encouraging us?

If you're following along on your outline we are discussing first those things that encourage us in our spiritual run. Before looking at Hebrews, I would like to discuss the importance of encouragement as it relates to the race metaphor. In a lengthy race, there are always a whole host of people and things encouraging those running. You have spectators cheering on the runners, support teams providing verbal and physical support and of course other runners pushing you to your limits. The effect of this is so great that most long distance training plans never once have you running a full length of a race in training and often plan for your longest practice run to be only 75% of the total distance of the race. One of the main reasons for this is that emotionally it is easier to run with those support/encouragement features in place and so finishing the race is not in question even though you may have never run that distance before. In the same way, the body of Christ, among other things, has been formed by Christ as a means of encouragement to each other so that we all reach the end of the race. Christ has, in fact, made the race precisely to be run this way having given different people different gifts so that we will discipline and aid not only ourselves but our brother who is running the same race.

Let's turn to Hebrews 12:1-read "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The author here directs us first to look at the witnesses of the race. The first group of witnesses to look at is those who have borne faithful testimony before us. The reason we look first at this group is that the text itself draws us to look here

because they, the faithful saints of the past, are the subject of the immediate context of the passage while the remaining witnesses, to be discussed later, are merely inferred. Glance back to Hebrews 11:32-40 and let us see what the “therefore” in Hebrews 12:1 is referring to in relation to witnesses. Please read along with me as the author of Hebrews closes out this passage concerning heroes of the faith. This is to me a most powerful passage which strikes me deeply every time I read it. We see that included in these witnesses are martyrs, a trait of these people being that they are called those “for whom the world was not worthy.” These people are those who have forsaken the admiration and love of the world so much that even the world itself was not worthy of their presence. This speaks so highly of them in that they have put off their own life and so put on Christ that they have become as He was, one for whom the world was not worthy. In the same way the Apostle Paul encourages us to similar change in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” One last thing to remember about this faithful group of witnesses who encourage us by their lives and sometimes their death is that we are all one body being made complete together and so it is their hope as it is ours that God continues to bring the elect into His family. This hope of unity is expressed in **1 Thessalonians 4:17** Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them (those already passed away) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. As those running the race, we cannot help but be encouraged by their example and life, yet we can never forget that we are all part of the same body and running the same race that they did. We should not forget that in the same way these people are our example and witnesses, that we perform the same role to those coming after us.

As we run the race, it is not just the faithful that have gone before us that encourage us through their example but it must also be those that are running alongside us in the race. Although we do other things for the body of believers, one thing we are commanded to do is to both encourage and be encouraged in the race. One way we do this is through the sharing of each others burdens. In Galatians 6:1-2, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” It is not enough to race alone for it is Christ who calls on us to support each other in our burdens. As we will see, each runner will contend with various perils along the way and He has given us the responsibility and privilege of being there for each other. Additionally, as already hinted at earlier, we are all gifted differently such that we all are working to the goal united in effort, each able to contribute in a unique way towards finishing the race. Without this mutual encouragement and spiritual power that exists in the body we would undoubtedly struggle mightily under only our own power.

Lastly, the Triune God can be seen intimately involved in empowering and encouraging us. Acts 17:28 states in the first part “for in Him we live and move and have our being.” In Ephesians 1:3 Paul states, “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly *places* in Christ.” Do not forget that while these other witnesses encourage and support us, it is only as Christ works through any person that they can be an encouragement towards others. Beyond this encouragement that Christ allows others to bring to us, He has promised us a provision of every spiritual

blessing--among these being the perseverance to complete the race that **He** has called us to run. We cannot forget that without His regenerative act in our life we too would be a spectator in this race and so we give thanks to Him and stand in awe of his grace that we can call ourselves a participant and not a spectator.

What does a disciplined spiritual walk entail?

While it is God who calls us to the race, He does not call us to a life of passivity. Returning to the race metaphor, we understand that a person preparing for a marathon cannot sit by idly in the months prior to the event but must constantly train their body for the rigors of the event. While one can attempt to run the race in such a condition, their performance will be less than optimal, and perhaps dangerous, as would be the walk of a Christian that was undisciplined in their spiritual training and race.

Let us examine the remainder of Hebrews 12:1 where we see the author calling on his readers to “lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Our preparation for the race and our spiritual training must first include laying aside every weight. The word weight(ong-cas), while meant to bring up pictures of bulk or mass also carries with it the idea of prominence...And it is this idea of prominence which is important because it more aptly describes what is being discussed when the word weight is used in this context. Weight or prominence describes the real life and habitual tendency of people to invert their priorities thereby placing less important things in life at the forefront. These things, while not inherently sinful in themselves are a weight that holds us back from running the race with the endurance that we are capable of. Matthew 6:33 is quick one stop shop for reprioritizing our life where Matthew states, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” As a small refresher, in this portion of Christ’s beatitudes he has stressed financial and monetary matters as well as those physical items that every person requires to live as well as our emotional and physical tie to those things. Tying Hebrews and Matthew together we see that when we invert our priorities, we place other things before our mind and strive to attain those ends rather than seeking first the Kingdom and allowing God to provide for our needs as He has already promised. By doing this we unnecessary lay a burden on ourselves that God has already promised to attend to and thereby hinder our own run with our lack of faith. The thought may occur to some that a little weight, while not optimal, in the end does not stop us from finishing the race or even running half bad compared to others we see. It is sad to say that such an attitude can creep slowly into our minds when even in the physical running races competitive shoes are marketed by their weight in grams such that a runner looks to add no extra weight to every step that they take in the race.(Show a gram) It is disconcerting that racers understand the importance of shedding all the excess weight they can because by holding on to it there is a multiplication of effort over time. Just the same, we should be disciplined enough to lay aside every weight in our spiritual walk such that each of our steps moves us in the strongest way towards the prize which Christ has purchased and laid before us.

Even more than the weight that we allow to burden our spiritual walk, the author lays before us an even more grievous danger. (Look back on the passage and reread with emphasis on the “sin which so easily ensnares us.) This greater danger that we must

avoid is sin. Earlier when discussing the word “weight” I explained that it was something characterized as a bulk, encumbrance or mass. One thing all of these words have in common is that they are very passive sounding (Heavy, but inactive). Compared to the weight we see that the greater danger of sin is that it moves to ensnare us. The Greek word for ensnare is *euperistatos* and can also be translated as besets, entangles, hinders and clings. Where weight is seen as passive, sin is seen as something actively challenging our walk in a way that does not merely slow us down but can, under its dominion, stop our progress. Even yet we have not done justice to the passage until we recognize that this sin is said to *easily* ensnare us. What this means for us is that we do not need to go looking for sin in order to commit it, for sin is ever waiting for its opportunity to seize us and it is only through constant discipline carried out through the power of Christ that we instead put to death the sin that is looking to ensnare us. Turning to the race picture, let us not forget that just as a runner will, through inactivity and laziness, recede in athletic capability as their muscles atrophy and the cardiovascular capabilities diminish, so the Christian, by comforting himself with the thought that he can maintain where he is instead of further being transformed, is in danger of spiritual apathy, atrophy and dangerously close to flirting with sin. Just as the author of Hebrews did not hold back on the power of sin so Paul also lays forth the same claim in more emphatic language. Let us turn to Romans 7:14-25 to see how a biblical view of the struggle with sin is presented. Read passage.

Once convinced that we must pursue a life dedicated to laying aside both weight and sin, we are next called to get out and run the race. The author not only calls us to run the race, but to run it with endurance, something which is best achieved only if we adhere to the earlier ideas of laying aside weight and sin. The word endurance is often translated as patience but the more complete or accurate idea of constancy or steadfastness is also present. Even better from Strong's there is a more complete concept brought out where it states that, “in the NT it is the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings.” I think this is the place that the author pictures us running the race because you see that he is a realist and not buying into the fantastical Christian walk perpetuated in many churches today that stress all glory and not bearing of the cross. Instead, he does not picture an imaginary race where everything is downhill and the wind is always at our back, but a real spiritual struggle where although we recognize the existence of hills and other distractions, we have both disciplined our life in the areas of weight and sin and are focused on that which should drive us to the end. I cannot leave this portion of scripture without focusing for a short time on the word “race”. While it fits perfectly well with the examples I have been giving, I know that when I read the word as someone who has done a little running the word “race” itself brings up a more passive picture than what is truly being presented. While a running race surely has an element of physical struggle, this is often seen as a personal struggle, looking to beat your best time, even when other runners are involved. The word the author uses here though, (pronounced ag-one) can also be used to describe a struggle or a battle and we should never lose the picture that our spiritual development and walk is not merely a race but is a battle against those things that are fighting against us such as the sin described earlier. If it sounds like I'm beating to death this difference between passivity and activity you are correct because as in a

physical race, so it is in our spiritual walk that it is only through God empowered activity that we are led to the end of the race... and this is where we turn to point three where we look at that which should drive us to the finish.

### What drives our perseverance?

There are many things in a physical race that motivate runners. For some it is money, others a reward, many do it for the satisfaction of merely finishing a difficult feat. But what, as Christians, should drive us onward, what should motivate us to perseverance in the faithful running of the spiritual race. Let's read Hebrews 12:2, "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 has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

I think it is clear here that our focus should be on Him who has been given all power and dominion and sits at the right hand of God, Jesus Christ. Paul corroborates this view in Colossians 3 where he calls us to look unto Christ and focus on Him. Verse 1 and 2 state, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth." And again in Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else." Now these are just a couple of examples, but Scripture is replete with the idea that Christ is our example, Christ is our first love and Christ is He who gave His life so that we could have life in Him. To focus, and here I'm talking about that which drives us forward in life... to focus on anything else is sinful idolatry and idolatry can only lead us away from the finish line of the only race that matters. (Just look at the Jews in the OT)

The author does not merely stop there and ask that we look to Jesus but he supports his case with the reasons we should do so. Two side notes here, first of all, don't ever let anyone fool you or put you in a category with the idea that Christianity is merely a blind leap of faith for that could not be further from the truth. The author of Hebrews certainly didn't believe that as we will see and Peter didn't in I Peter 3:15 when he asked his readers to "always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you." Second, we should not forget the audience that the author is immediately writing to. This community of Jewish believers had taken the audacious step of turning against all that was important to them but as the pressure began to bear down on them, the weight of the expectations of their traditions and their people, many had turned back and abandoned the race and it is the fear of more defections that most concerned the author. So among his many arguments here we see an impassioned plea to turn back to Christ not only because of the work he accomplished in his humility as seen in the first part of verse 2 but also in his glorification described at the end of the verse... And we, just as much as those early Jewish Christians need to keep our eyes focused on Christ.

Turning back now to why the author feels Christ should be the focus of our race, we see Christ described as the author and finisher of our faith. For those who look at things from the Reformed perspective, this is a tremendous aid to our spiritual walk and hope of perseverance because we know and believe that it is Christ who saved us while we were yet sinners and it is He who will continue to take us all the way to the completion of our

faith throughout our journey. On the other hand, many writers comment on this passage that here Christ is merely portrayed as the example of our faith, the one who shows us how the faithful life is to be led from beginning to end, but that is to merely gut the verse of the spiritual power behind it, the promise of perseverance in a God that has saved us and continues to uphold us in that salvation throughout eternity. We need not rest solely in Chapter 12 to see the author's point because he reassures us as to his meaning in Hebrews 5:9 where he asserts the same thing, "And being made perfect, he(Christ) became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" the word for author in the Greek (ah-eee-tee-os) here being even more emphatic as highlighting the causal aspect of the regeneration by Christ in the salvation of man. Christ is not only the author of our faith, but he is called the finisher as well and as to the finishing of the race, there is no better way to express the meaning than Matthew Henry puts it, "He is *the finisher of our faith*; he is the fulfiller and the fulfilling of all scripture-promises and prophecies; he is the perfecter of the canon of scripture; he is the finisher of grace, and of the work of faith with power in the souls of his people; and he is the judge and the rewarder of their faith; he determines who they are that reach the mark, and from him, and in him, they have the prize."

Not only is He the author and finisher of our faith, He is the ultimate example of perseverance or endurance. Unlike myself, Christ completed all that he did, including his voluntary death with joy knowing among other things that He was doing the work of the Father. Just the same this should be our mindset in all that we do, including the deepest struggles of life. Additionally, He bore the shame of those closest to him and endured the terrible humiliation and pain of the cross all with joy because He knew where His focus was, and that is why our focus needs to be on Him. Lastly, he drives our perseverance in the race because he is at the right hand of God seated in power having been given all power in heaven and earth(Matthew 28:18) and that enough should strengthen us in our spiritual race. We, no less than the earliest Jewish Christians, need not get discouraged, we need not leave the race when those weights and sins seem to have the upper hand because Christ himself went through much worse and endured it all so that He might be both the author and the finisher of our faith.

## CONCLUSION

I asked you in the beginning to picture a race setting and the various people involved in the race. If you remember back, there was the well conditioned athlete, the prepared amateur, the struggling and those outside the race. The author of Hebrews has not laid forth the picture of a race merely to admire its metaphorical qualities, but he is calling for decisive appraisal of your life and a call to action. He knows that a serious runner must calculate the cost of training, plan the training out and then execute a disciplined life of action if the run is to be successful. It took the Jews no effort at all to revert back to Judaism just as it takes us no effort to fall into sin yet despite the difficulties involved, you are being called to life of discipline and a life of laying aside those weights and sin that you find in your own life. I implore you to take the challenge laid before you, examine your life, as a disciplined runner trains his body, and train yourself spiritually. But do it all knowing that unlike the runner, we train not under our own power, not for a metal trophy, money or fame but we train under and in the power of Christ and we train for an existence that goes far beyond this earthly race. Lastly, unlike the runner, we don't

merely train for ourselves but we train so that we can aid the entire body so don't ever think that by spiritually treading water you are impacting only yourself, you are in effect hindering not only him who is running beside you but those who come after you and should have you as an example.

All of this being said, I earlier promised to mention the other group and I would be remiss now if I didn't mention that last group for there are some today that know they are merely observers of the race. Oh, some may be far away, only vaguely aware there is a race, others may be so close that they have bought the clothes and look like the best of the runners fooling even those in the race yet they stand just at the sidelines watching others compete because to them the struggle inside the race is not worth the prize. In either case I call on you to reevaluate the value of the prize compared to the eternal insignificance of the struggle, for as Paul states in II Corinthians 4:17-18, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal."

The call is the same to each, Christ is calling you to focus on him, to trust in His sacrifice, to live in His faith and He gives Himself, the example of past believers and those around you today to encourage you to persevere and finish this most important race. Let us go forth and run our race with endurance....