

“Let Us Run With Endurance The Race That Is Set Before Us!”.

Text: Heb 12:1-3

1) The task at hand

Suggested Hymns:

2) The advice given to us for the fulfilment of the task

64, 129, 352, 361, 341

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Hebrews 12:1-3, ¹ *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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, 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.*

³ *For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“All out for Christ!” is the clear call of the Gospel for this Sunday. An uncompromising battle rages between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

But the outcome of the battle is not in doubt because “*Christ, the royal Master leads against the Foe,*”¹ and before His almighty power the devil and his legions must fall in utter defeat.

On what side do we stand? Here we cannot be neutral. “*He who is not with Me,*” says the victorious Leader, “*is against Me.*”² Take note of that if you feel indifferent or wavering, faint-hearted or discouraged.

Our text gives you the same challenge of loyalty and devotion to Christ, the same warning against defection from His cause. The words were first addressed to converted Hebrews who found themselves in a trying position, surrounded by enemies of Christ who mocked and persecuted them in various ways.

At one stage they had made a fine start in the Christian life, but now under the pressure of opposition they were in danger of growing weary and faint. The Apostle here tries to give them new courage and joy for a vigorous Christianity.

Do we not also need this tonic? Do we not frequently notice that we are slipping in zeal, growing slack and weary in our Christian life? Victory calls for strenuous effort. In our Christian life we are striving for victory, and here, too, intense application of all our spiritual energy is demanded.

Christ does not set us upon an escalator, as it were, a mechanical stairway that carries us to the upper floor without our being obliged to move our feet or use a single muscle.

Hence Scripture describes our life in terms of warfare or, as in our text, in terms of athletic contests which call for concentrated energy. Here is the exhortation which comes to us today, *“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us!”* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Task At Hand

The picture that lies behind our text is that of a runner in the race seeking to win the prize. The prize, in his case, may be worth little in itself, but for the runner the reward is so great that he is willing to train long and hard and, in the race, use every ounce of endurance, and active energy, to gain the prize. Fellow Christians, so *“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”*

The runner in the race has a definite goal to which he strives. What is your goal in life? Ask anyone this question and usually you will hear answers like these, *“I am living to establish a profitable business.” “I am living to make a fortune.” “I am living to establish a family.” “I am living to learn a science, an art, a profession.” “I am living to have as much enjoyment as I can.”*

Suppose that after these answers you should ask this further question, *“Yes, and what then?”* Yes, my friends, what then? Then, if you had no higher aim, all that fabric of your dreams and striving will be ripped to pieces, and you yourself will go down, down, down lower than the grave.

Our Christian aim in life is infinitely higher than all these mundane aims. Eternal salvation through Christ, with its complete transformation of our present

sinful nature into the likeness of Christ, blissful union and communion with God, and perfect service in the eternal Kingdom: that is our ultimate goal.

Our intermediate goal, now while we are still on the way to heaven is, as expressed in Philippians 3:9, *to be found in [Christ], not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*

And then, in the strength of this righteousness which covers all our sins, to live as it is befitting for believers in Christ, striving with all one's strength to become more and more like Christ in our devotion to God and in unselfish love to our fellow men. This Christian aim of life is presented to the Hebrews in metaphor, *"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."*

Each item of the exhortation claims our attention. *"Let us run with endurance,"* earnestly, strenuously, like good athletes. *"He who endures to the end shall be saved."*³ Sorrowfully St. Paul asks the Galatians: *"O foolish Galatians, Who has bewitched you? ...⁷ You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"*⁴ Do you remember your confirmation classes? Where are those who were confirmed with you now? Do they still Worship the Lord?

Many, thank God, are still running well. But some, like Atalanta in the famous Greek myth, have been bewitched by the golden apples, *"the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life."* Some have dropped out from the race because, instead of keeping their eye fixed on the goal, they looked to the grandstand, seeking the approval of the world rather than that of the Trainer, yielding to the sinister devil whose name is "What-will-the-people-say," fearing man more than God.

My fellow runners, endure, hold out to the end, remember the prize, and so *"Run in such a way that you may obtain it."*⁵

"Let us run the race that is set before us." The athlete cannot choose his course. He runs the course set by the judge of the games. Likewise, our Christian course is set for us by God. He has given us the rules of the race. He has made known the *"good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."*⁶

And God has arranged the circumstances under which we run, the difficulties of the course which we must master. It is in the familiar surroundings of the life which we now are living that God calls us to run, in the callings into which His providence has led us amid the annoyances we daily experience. Where we are, from the very position we this day occupy, our race is set for us.

“Let us run the race.” Progress, steady progress is called for, no matter how hard the course. As that great “runner” Paul said: ***“One thing I do ... I press toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”***⁷ “Onward, onward!” is the watchword. Time is short. The goal is far. The task is great, the steady growth of the inner man, the steady progress in all that is good and noble and true, the steady exercise in faithfulness and self-denial — with one word, sanctification.

Paul puts it this way, ¹ ***Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God;*** ² ***for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.*** ³ ***For this is the will of God, your sanctification.***⁸

This task, we all know, cannot be completed in this life. As long as we live in the flesh we remain sinful, but we must strive to finish the task, must bend every effort to reach the goal. For, says the writer a few verses after our text, ***“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”***⁹

The Christian race is, in the last analysis, the good fight of faith. Our ultimate goal is on the unseen shore. All the promises of grace and power to encourage the runner are contained in God’s Word. It is that Word to which we must cling in faith, seeing with faith’s eye the beautiful goal, grasping with faith’s hand the grace that enables us to run.

In faith we must fight against our flesh with its weakness and love of ease. In faith we must overcome the difficulties, the trials, and temptations which would prompt us to give up the race.

Therefore, in faith ***“let us run with endurance the race which is set before us.”*** The task as conceived in our text is not easy, but the text also has good advice to help us in fulfilling our task.

2. The Advice Given To Us For The Fulfilment Of Our Task

¹ Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us 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.

The previous chapter, the famous Chapter 11, has let this “*cloud of witnesses*” pass by in review — a long series of Old Testament heroes and heroines of the faith who ran the race with endurance amid the most difficult circumstances, relying on God, holding fast to His promises, and who were, finally, crowned with God’s approving “Well done!”

There are some people who think, that the writer to the Hebrews, is using the figure of “the race,” and that, the “cloud of witnesses” represents the thousands of spectators in the stadium sitting upon the tiers of seats watching the contestants, appearing to these much like a cloud, dressed as they are in white robes.

On the basis of this understanding they believe that the victors in the good fight of faith now in the heavenly world actually watch us as we contend here below, eagerly following our progress.

Now it may be true that the saints in heaven know in a general way of the victories which Christ their Head is winning in and through His members on earth. But Scripture gives us no basis for the belief that they know in particular what is going on in the arena of this life.

In Isaiah 63:16 we read, “*Doubtless You are our Father, Though Abraham was ignorant of us, And Israel does not acknowledge us.*” Our text does not say either that this “cloud” surrounding us is a cloud of spectators who are watching us.

Our English word “witness” is used in a double sense, that of a spectator who sees and that of an attestor who bears witness to what he has experienced.

The Greek word used here is “*martus*” [pronounced mar-toos] and has gone over into our language as martyr and has only the second meaning of the English word witness, namely, testifier, but not the meaning of spectator.

So these victors of Chapter 11 are not witnesses of us, but testifiers to us. As we read their lives in Scripture they bear witness to the blessedness of the

good fight of faith and to God's faithfulness to His promises. They are proofs of the power of God by which they have overcome and of the blessed end of a faithful life in the heavenly City and Country which God has prepared.

This cloud of witnesses has been augmented by millions of witnesses in the New Testament age down to our own times, including men and women whom we ourselves have known and still know, whose unwearied endurance in running the race even under the greatest difficulties must bolster up our courage and our resolve to run the race as they did.

When in his Egyptian campaign Napoleon led his troops through the neighbourhood of the pyramids, he said, "*Soldiers, forty centuries look down on you.*"

So our text says for our encouragement, "*Forty and more centuries of energetic runners in the race set before us testify how good it is to trust in the Lord and, in His power, to strive for the Better Country. Follow them in faith and endurance, then you, too, shall have the victor's crown, God's approval, God's home.*"

Our text continues, "*let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.*"

"*Every weight.*" The runner in the race must be free of weights and impediments, free of everything that might hinder his progress and draw him to the ground. When we notice that we are not making proper progress in our Christian race, let us see whether we are carrying some weight which is dragging us down to earth.

It may be something which is innocent enough in itself, but we find that for us it is a hindrance. Each one must be his own judge. Certain friendships, certain earthly loves, certain amusements or pastimes or courses of reading may be too fascinating; the lure of wealth, the quest for honour, excess in eating or drinking may be hampering us spiritually.

Whatever it may be that so preoccupies us that we forget our race, that makes us disinclined to prayer and the study of God's Word, that tempts us to sit down when we should run — it is a weight which must be laid aside.

There is one particular weight that must above all be laid aside, “*the sin which so easily ensnares us.*” We speak of besetting sins in the sense of pet sins. But what is meant here is every sin, for every sin besets us, clings closely, entangles our feet so that we cannot run.

Indeed, the laying aside of sin, fighting with determination against all evil within ourselves, is the chief thing called for when we are told to run with endurance the race that is set for us. The world condones sin and asks for the liberty of self-expression. No, my friends, not self-expression, but self-preservation is the big thing in life. To preserve our life, our soul, we must fight against the flesh and its desire to express itself. For that we have entered into the race.

No doubt this laying aside of every weight and every sin is hard. But here is a final counsel which brings effective help, “*2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.*”

The phrase “*Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith*” is rich in precious content and full of inspiration for us runners. For one thing, it means that Jesus is the great Leader or Captain of the believing army of God, that He is the Pioneer of faith who has opened the way for others and in His own life has shown faith to perfection.

Do not think that it is startling that faith should be attributed to Jesus. He is the Son of God, but at the same time the Son of Man. As a Man and as our Substitute He did indeed exercise faith in the sense of perfect reliance on God, firm trust in His promises, a life lived in the Word.

Chapter 2 of our Epistle quotes the Messiah as expressly saying, “*I will put My trust in Him.*”¹⁰ Also in the matter of faith Jesus fulfilled the Law for us and has become our Example, yes, the perfect Example.

Jesus is the greatest Hero of faith. All others have run their race in weakness and sin — not so Jesus. Right here in our text the supreme exhibition of His faith is mentioned, *who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.* Jesus looked beyond the cross to the finished work of redemption in which He would rejoice with all the redeemed.

Unswervingly Jesus went forward to that goal even though it was by way of the cross of shame. There was no greater faith ever shown than on the cross when even in the agony of God-forsakenness Jesus still held fast to God, saying, ***“My God, My God!”*** and in the moment of apparent defeat cried out in triumph, ***“It is finished!”***

Is your race hard? The race of Jesus was harder. Must you suffer? Jesus suffered more. In comparison with what you must endure, ***“consider Him who endured*** (throughout His life and especially in His Passion) ***such hostility from sinners against Himself.”*** Yes, consider Jesus, that perfect Example of faith and endurance and obedience to God’s will amid the most terrible opposition, ***“lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”***

By His perfect obedience even unto the death of the cross Jesus has become the Author of eternal salvation¹¹ and so, too, the Author of our faith. His high-priestly sacrifice is the one foundation upon which our faith rests. Through the precious Gospel which proclaims that sacrifice, Jesus wins our hearts, creates the faith which claims His work as our redemption.

In that Gospel He also gives us the assurance that no man shall pluck His sheep out of His hand.¹² Faith in Jesus as the Author and Finisher of our faith alone gives us the power to follow His example.

Therefore, you runners, ***“looking unto Jesus,”*** look constantly away from all others and only upon Him. Jesus will lead you from victory unto victory until you see Him face to face ***“at the right hand of the throne of God.”***

Keep your eyes fixed upon Jesus, the great Saviour and Example, drawing from Him the strength needed for your glorious race, and then you will experience the truth of the promise that ***those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.***¹³ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Hymn 208

² Luke 11:23

³ Matthew 24:13

⁴ Gal. 3:1; 5:7

⁵ 1 Cor. 9:24

⁶ Eph. 2:10

⁷ Phil. 3:13-14

⁸ 1 Thess 4:1-3

⁹ Hebrews 12:14

¹⁰ Hebrews 2:13

¹¹ Heb. 5:9

¹² John 10:28

¹³ Isaiah 40:31