

Faith on Display

Bob Sweeney Jr. and his family looked at the charred remains of their mountain log cabin where they had lived. Theirs was one of the 1400 structures that were destroyed by the historic Chimney Tops fire on Nov. 28. “He asked himself: *Do I wail or grow angry and shake my fist at God, or do I worship?*” After reviewing Job’s response to his trials he turned to his son and said, “*As hard as it seems, today we will worship our Lord.*”¹ We overcome discouragement by enduring.

Endurance is focusing on a goal greater than distractions along the way.

Discouragement comes when we focus on the distractions.

The author of Hebrews offers three ways to overcome discouragement by looking back to the heroes of faith, by looking to Jesus, and by looking ahead to hope.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb. 12:1-3)

This section begins with the atmosphere of a footrace in an arena.

The grandstands are pictured here as clouds of witnesses, filled with those who have run before them and completed their races.

Race is the Greek ‘agon’, from which we get the English word, *agony*.

Races were demanding, grueling and agonizing. Anyone who has participated in a race knows the discipline of mind and body required, the determination to continue and the perseverance to go beyond personal limits.

Two fears of Runners:

1. Running out of strength before reaching the goal.
2. Reaching the finish line with energy left over.

The Christian race is a marathon, a long-distance race, not a sprint.

¹Prayer Point: *Praise in the ashes of Gatlinburg*, Vol. 17, Number 10, (Samaritan’s Purse, Spring 2017), p. 32.

The author urges the contemporary racers to lay aside their training weights and strive to win. He encourages them to ***not grow weary and lose heart***, but to run their race with ***endurance***. Though associated with the physical stamina required for a race, the character **quality of endurance** goes much deeper.

Endurance comes by knowing we will win the prize unless we give up on the race.

“Endurance: hupomonae is a steady determination to keep going. It means continuing even when everything in you wants to slow down or give up.”²

To endure is to tenaciously hold on until a goal is accomplished.

MacArthur describes the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews:

“Many of the Hebrew Christians to whom the letter was written had started well. They had seen signs and wonders and were thrilled with their new lives (Heb. 2:4). But as the new began to wear off and problems began to arise, they began to lose their enthusiasm and their confidence. They started looking back at the old ways of Judaism, and around them and ahead of them at the persecution and suffering, and they began to weaken and waver.”³

Several sources of encouragement are offered: **First**, the Heroes of Faith—those who had gone before them, **then** to the example of Jesus; followed by a positive encouragement to run and not lose heart.

Though they were weary and thinking of giving in, they were encouraged to keep moving forward in their Christian lives, like runners on a track.⁴

I. Looking Back to the Heroes of Faith

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is filled with examples those who gained God’s approval for their faith.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.

For by it the men of old gained approval. (11:1-2)

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 373.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1989), p. 322.

The greatest thing we need to understand is that we please God by our faith.

The heroes of faith faced extreme challenges –through their faith.

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

(Heb. 11:6)

Two of the greatest apologetics our world is missing are faith and Hope.

Faith is an active relationship with a living Christ that believes the promises.

Hope is knowing that He will keep His promises and have a sure reward for us.

Faith is: dead to doubts, dumb to discouragements, blind to impossibilities.

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

The Heroes of Faith ran their race and inspire us to run our race.

“We did it, so can you!”

“Others have run their race and gained God’s approval, now you run yours.”

Look at the winners!

Follow champions. They set the pace for winning the race.

They are Witnesses – Greek word that our English word, *martyr* comes from.

Wiersbe writes,

“These people are not witnessing what we are doing; rather, they are bearing witness to us that God can see us through. God bore witness to them and they are bearing witness now to us.”⁵

The Scriptures inspire:

The place of the Old Testament is vital.

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom. 15:4)

⁵ Ibid.

Testimonies Inspire: It helps us to hear people's stories of how they overcame great difficulties. If they believed and came through, so can we.

Fellowship inspires:

An effective local church is encouraging and necessary for healthy growth.

And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit as some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24-25).

From the Movie, *The Edge* – Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin (1997)

An intellectual billionaire and two lesser men struggle to band together and survive after getting stranded in the Alaskan wilderness with a blood-thirsty Kodiak Bear hunting them down.

“What one man has done, another can do.”

What the heroes of the faith did, we can do as well.

II. Looking to Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith

“...fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself.”

Jesus is the ultimate illustration of faith, being the object of faith itself.

When He became man He submitted to the Father's will, and was dependent upon the Father for everything. He was fully man.

John wrote,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing...” (John 5:19-20)

Before Jesus went to the cross He prayed, “Not My will but Thy will be done,” because He lived to do the will of the Father. Jesus endured the cross, with joy, for He came with one purpose, to accomplish salvation for mankind.

The author of Hebrews spoke of Jesus as the ultimate hero of faith
 – the author and perfecter of faith
 ...Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.

Hope rejoices in the promised future.

How do we run our race of faith? Looking behind, Looking at Jesus and...

III. Looking Ahead as You Run the Race

As we run the race before us, we look ahead in hope

¹...let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1, 3)

The Message says,

“...All these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins.”

How do we run our race effectively?

...lay aside every encumbrance

Encumbrance (onkos) *simply a bulk or mass of something.*

Whatever it is –good or bad- it weighs us down, diverts our attention, saps our energy, dampens our enthusiasm for the things of God.

If we want to win we must not carry excess weight.

It’s not what the weight is, but the fact that it slows us down, keeping us from winning.

In most sports, especially where speed and endurance count, weighing in is a daily routine. It is one of the simplest, but most reliable, tests of being in shape. When an athlete goes over his weight limit, he is put on a stricter exercise and diet program until he is down to where he should be - or he is put on the bench or off the team.⁶

Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for the events. During practice they added weights to their ankles when they ran to build up muscle strength. During a race they took them off. In our race everything that hinders our progress, even good things are removed in order to run effectively.

Someone has said, “A good athlete does not choose between the good and the bad; he chooses between the better and the best.”

...and the sin which so easily entangles us

What easily entangles us?

Some believers may have cherished weaknesses they are in need of confessing and forsaking such as bitterness, addictions, habits of swearing, wasting time, sensual music and movies – any sins of the flesh that they are hesitant to yield to Christ’s control.

Christian’s Bar of Soap: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

Without naming any particular sin the writer may specifically be referring to the sin of unbelief that hinders the race of faith. Unbelief kept Israel out of the promised land; and unbelief prevents us from entering into the promised inheritance in Christ.

The phrase “by faith” is used twenty-one times in Hebrews 11.

Paul wrote,

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable” (1 Cor. 9:24-25)

Look back – Look at Christ – Look ahead to hope

⁶ MacArthur. P. 376.

What do you have to look forward to at the end of the race?

The agonizing race of the marathon was run for some reward.

Without it no one would begin, let alone finish.

We anticipate spiritual blessings here, and a heavenly reward for faithful service.

Phillips Brooks:

Do not pray for tasks equal to your strength,
but for strength equal to your tasks.”

We live and run our race by His strength.

By the power of the Holy Spirit we can run the race and by faith overcome.

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer...