

Hebrews 12

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now for a moment to the epistle to the Hebrews and to words we find in chapter 12. And the words at the end of verse 1 particularly, Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. I want to return tonight to the theme of discipleship, but from a different point of view to what we saw this morning.

There are many images in the Bible of the Christian life, which sometimes compare to soldiers, sometimes to mariners.

Sometimes to wrestlers, sometimes to boxers, and sometimes indeed to sheep. In this verse we're compared to runners running a race.

And I suppose that in a sport-obsessed age like yours, this is a very powerful metaphor, because all of us, to some extent, are aware of all that's going on in athletics and other areas of sporting activity.

[1 : 36] And I want to examine tonight in context what the Bible is saying to us here with regard to the nature of our own discipleship, this race that we are called upon to run.

I want to know is, first of all, the emphasis that the writer makes upon it being the race marked out for us.

But as the early versions say, the race that's set before us. It isn't a race in which we ourselves choose the course, or choose the lanes, or choose the finishing line, or the distance.

It is the race that God himself has marked out for us. And sometimes we may look enviously at the race that others are asked to run.

The race seems so much more interesting, or so much easier, or so much more useful, than the race, the course that God has assigned to ourselves.

[2 : 55] But the point made here is that God himself assigns the course to us, and assigns to each one of us, our own particular lane.

I suppose that all of you will remember that in many forms of racing, in short distance and middle distance running, you have to keep to your own lane, at least for part of the course.

And if you stray from that lane, then you are disqualified. And God too has marked out lanes for each one of us. And God asks us to stay in our own lane.

Now I must say at once, having said that, that if we do stray over the lane, God doesn't disqualify us. And thank God for that.

Because at some point, virtually all of us do stray from our own lane. Perhaps barge into others, obstruct the course of whatever, deviate from the course that God has appointed for us.

[4 : 09] But here is, I think, a very important principle. That each one of us must abide for the course that God himself has martyred for us.

If you remember the Lord himself, his claim in John 17 was, I have finished the work which you gave me to do.

It wasn't always the work that even the Lord himself found easy. We see at at least one point how much he wished that his race were different and that God asked him to drink some other cup and walk by some other road.

And yet for him too, there was some work that was given him to do. The Apostle Paul said, I have finished the course.

And sometimes too, as we saw, the course wasn't to Paul's liking. And yet it was the course that God had appointed for him.

[5 : 30] And so, it's important for each one of us not to be as useful as somebody else, or as eminent, or as secure, or to enjoy their providence, or to possess their gifts, or to be in their sphere,

or pursue their vocation, but to be where God has put us.

To encounter and negotiate the providences that God sends, the cup that God gives us to drink, to use the gifts that God has given to ourselves, to identify the vocation to achieve callings.

It is so easy for us to stray for all kinds of reasons into callings which are not callings at all.

and I don't confine that to such things as the call to the ministry. Every one of us has his and her own calling, our own vocation, our own mission life into which God by prominence, opportunity, inclination has led us and for which my gifts God has prepared us.

But yes, I may say something on the race, the course, which is full-time Christian service.

[7 : 22] I would say, of course, that all of us are called to such service whatever else fear. But I would say, too, that there are those called to serve God full-time in the proclamation of this gospel have either not heard or not listened to God's voice.

I know it sometimes said that if one can stay out of the ministry, then one should.

And I would say to that, there is no divine call that we cannot disobey and cannot suppress.

Sometimes God calls clearly. And sometimes one sees gifted persons who might do so much in the service of God's kingdom, but they say, I will do better in some secular and in some more indirect sphere.

and they will say to me, that is my ministry. I'm not going to make the choice for anyone, obviously, but each one of us must stand before our own providence, our own opportunity, our own gifts, our own desires, the voice of conscience within, and ask ourselves, am I running the race that is set before me, appointed for me?

[9 : 27] As I said before, I will step out of the lane, I will run out of the lane, sometimes even for long distances.

I want you to know that God will still forgive you. And I want you to know that all the mistakes we make in the area of guidance, God may forgive, and God may overrule.

I have seen men who ought to be ministers, serve in other professions, I seen them serve as teachers, I seen them try to serve as pop stars, I am sure God forgave them, and I know how true and how important it is that the road to glory starts at our feet, even where those feet are where we ought not to be.

But let's, as far as we can, be sure that we're in our own lane, and if we are there, then let's stand it. Yes, there are those beside us, and they're more gifted than you, those beside us, who are more prominent than you, those beside you, who are more useful than you, there are those beside you, over his lines, there seems to fall no shadow, no sorrow, and no pain.

[11 : 28] And you may say, Lord, can I not have that woman's lane, that man's lane, I would like to have that lane.

And God is saying, let's run with patience, the race set before us. I suppose at one time or other, I have angered almost every other Christian.

And I have learned as I have heard their stories, that there was so much in their lives which was not enviable. And their hearts, and all their privacy, and all their quietness, they knew their own sorrow.

And I know now that no lane is better than my own, and certainly no other lane is better for me.

So we run the race that is set out for us. And then you see the preparation we are to make for this race.

[12 : 54] let us throw off everything that hinders on the sin that so easily entangles.

And there are two great principles there. One is lay aside the sin that entangles.

again, picture the race. And here we are coming up to the starting line.

We've got this obstacle course to run. It's going to make tremendous demands. It's going to demand stamina, demand endurance.

it's going to take us up over the hills, across the rivers, down through the marshes. Remember Bunyan's pilgrim.

[14 : 00] He had to go through the slough on the marsh, the bog land of despondency. It's not easy to run through the marshes.

He had to climb then through the hill difficulty over the mountain, and that wasn't easy. I've been here to go through the dark road, the valley of the shadow of death.

Well, that's the race. And here we are turning up for it. And your feet are enmeshed, entangled, in this thing that he calls sin.

are you saying to us, are you out of your mind? Are you going to run through the bog land with that net around your feet?

Are you going to climb the hill difficulty with your feet, enmeshed in that? Are you going to hold your hole in the valley of the shadow of death with your feet tied and meshed in those sins?

[15 : 20] I appeal simply to your own consciences. You know what sin is entangling you, what sin is sapping your spiritual energy?

What sin is undermining your stamina, your powers of endurance, your reflexes, your decision-making ability, your wisdom, your aptitude to bear witness to those unbelievers whom you come across?

And here he is asking for utter and total ruthlessness. you must with yourself of that sin that is entangling you.

But that is not all. Tho' he says everything that hinders are as the ordinary notions have it every weight.

Here we are again we are at the starting line for this great cross-country race props this marathon with all its demands and do we turn up carrying all kinds of burdens things on our backs things on our hands wearing heavy gear so weighed down by this impediment and that.

[17 : 00] Now of course the key fact here is this those weights are not in themselves sins that is they are not in themselves violations of any of the Ten Commandments and it may be that for the whole of the human race apart from you these things will be no problem but you cannot run the race with this burden with this weight I didn't particularize it may be some recreation it may be some relationship it may be some business partnership whatever it is it's a weight and remember for almost anybody else perfectly lawful no problem no impediment

Jesus said once it may be your eye that's causing the problem plug it out it may be your hand cut it off it may be your fruit cut it off but Lord what's wrong with having an eye nothing except it's a weight for you but everyone else has an eye Lord and a hand and a foot why can't I have an eye and a hand and a foot because for you it's a weight it's an impediment Rabbi Duncan often thought that his very love of theology was itself an impediment to a spiritual life because sometimes a great question in doctrine or metaphysics would take total possession of his mind he wouldn't eat and he wouldn't sleep and he wouldn't pray because for days he was enmeshed in this particular intellectual quest and we say the

Lord what's wrong with all those theological books things nothing except that sometimes they can come between you and your duty to others to the church to your family they can come between you and you very God and Savior and those judgments we must make not on the basis of the things in themselves but on the basis of the impact of me and the implications for me and so he's saying to us let's lay aside all the sin in which your feet have enmeshed and let's lay aside every single impediment and can we take time and let it be quiet for a moment to reflect for ourselves what those weights are we speak sometimes of things indifferent there is nothing indifferent every choice we make is significant every one has impact on our

Christian lives we must each one identify for herself what is a weight for me which is not a weight to anyone else in the worldwide church of God but to myself lay aside every weight and so may we our step for action they decide the sin they decide the weight and then he speaks of the great encouragements we have as we begin to run this race there are perhaps two of those I want to emphasize for a moment first of all there is the great cloud of witnesses now I know that sometimes it is said that these witnesses are the saints in glory standing in the gallery in heaven looking down on us as we run the race sometimes appalled and dismayed sometimes applauding like crowds in the great amphitheaters of the ancient world on the great sports stadia on the present day and in many ways it is a very dramatic and very provocative and evocative picture all these saints who have gone before us and indeed we have every right to believe that they are very much alive and every right to long for that moment when we shall be reunited with those whom we once you the Lord who have gone home to glory before us but I don't believe we are today or tonight in the gallery looking down on us I believe indeed that they are focused so firmly on the Lamb in the center of the throne and he fully captivates them and absorbs them and he receives and deserves all their attention and along with him all the magnificent scenery of heaven in all its brilliance so no I don't think they are tonight in the gallery at all looking down it's not that they are witnesses of your race and of my race it is something I think much more direct than it is this they are witnesses to the faithfulness of God they are not spectators they are bearing testimony glory to the faithfulness and

the glory and the grace of God these witnesses are the witnesses of Hebrews 11 all those great heroes of the faith and the writer told their story offered in such abundant detail not to magnify or glorify them but through them to magnify their God because they were witnesses to God and as we run the race these witnesses are saying to us keep on going because

[25 : 06] God is with you and God is faithful and God will never let you down God keeps his promises you remember Abraham he went out not knowing where he went and God gave him a promise before his seed a promise that seemed impossible of fulfillment and God gave him by miracle his son Isaac Abraham said there I told you God was faithful and then God said to him go and sacrifice your son your lonely son your seed the promise and off he went he had trusted that in all age

God could give him a son God had given him against hope he believed in hope now God said go and kill your son Abraham said somewhere deep down Lord that's a promise you want me to kill but some of he said you may not understand what God is saying to you but somehow and I think it was only somehow God will still keep that promise God kept it sometimes we don't have much but somehow

Moses when God said to lead my people to freedom Moses could only have had a somehow faced with the Red Sea he could have had only a somehow faced with a barren desert whether it water or food he could have had only a somehow and maybe tonight down where you are in your lane things may seem dark and impossible perhaps but there is still a somehow and the witnesses are saying keep going keep seeing him who is invisible

I know you have here no continuing city but keep moving towards that city that has foundations as builder and maker as God all these heroes of Hebrews 11 all the great heroes of Christian church history and all those around you tonight old and young who have walked any time of God there too are witnesses and they say to you keep going look up remember somehow remember that God keeps his promises and then there was this looking to Jesus we have this great cloud of witnesses urging us on telling us on the fearfulness of God but then too we have Jesus and the language is very careful very precise it's not simply looking but looking away looking away to Jesus not looking at our feet not looking at those in the lane beside us not looking at those behind us not looking at the obstacles before us but looking at

[30 : 30] Jesus as if in many ways he were the marker that we are to follow or perhaps in more specific athletic terms the pacemaker on whom we are to keep our eye or the path finder in more military terms who guides us in as we engage in this great warfare look away to Jesus and look away to him in the specific capacity that he is the author and perfecter of faith and it's saying a remarkable thing to us it's saying he was a believer he lived by faith it's saying in other words he too run the race he was the one in whom faith shone at its most glorious in whom it found its most perfect expression this one who laid down his life at the commandment of

God in his very early thirties before in human terms he had achieved anything he written no books founded no college set up no television channel founded no political party had secured no great following and then God said to him lay down your life and God said to him I'll give it back to you again and down he went through Gethsemane to Golgotha and on Golgotha that long journey through those interminable hours to the moment of abandonment and dereliction and he just kept on running and he stayed in the rain and he loved to the end and he said

Abba into your hands I commit my spirit and he cried it is finished and it was all over and off he went Peter and the rest utterly totally dejected it was all over oh fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken did you not know that the son of man must suffer and after three days be raised from the dead all of us who are Christians have made choices conditional upon the resurrection

I have staked my life on the certainty that one day God will raise me from the dead and if he won't I've been a fool a utter total complete fool I wasted the only life I will ever have look away to Jesus because you know that cross people said what a wasted life what a waste of a talent what a waste of a splendid human being but

God raised him from the dead watch Jesus run his race watch him run not only to the grave but through the grave that moment when the angel says he is not here he is risen and look to just for a moment at this what was that kept him going the hope for the joy set before him endured the cross every time a modern preacher preaches he is under pressure to be practical whatever that means there is nothing more practical than to focus tonight on the joy set before us because if we are not

heavenly minded we shall be the earthly use tell you the only purpose the only practical reason for the church of

[37 : 15] Christ exists is to lead people to heaven and if you tell me oh I'm not interested in that kind of thing in heaven that is a fatal deficiency in our Christianity see as Murray said bereft of his wife there is no earthly comfort heart and we are sustained by no comfort but what this world can afford and we are not sustained at all I'm not sure but our most urgent need tonight is a recovery of belief in heaven a sense of its reality a sense of its imminence and a longing to be there it's the hope on the finishing tape that sustains the runner let us run with patience the rest set before us and let's do so for the joy set before us may

God bless this word let's join in prayer oh Lord we ask you who alone can open hearts and who alone can give force to the truth to use it to strengthen and encourage us in the race we are called upon to run help us all Lord to know what lane we should be in and help us to keep to that lane give us the grace Lord to step for action give us above all the grace to look away from all in this world that distracts us to focus on the one who self focused on the joy set before him hear us in his name amen may the blessing of

God almighty rest upon each one of us now and eternally amen