

The Great Race

Series: The Supremacy Of The Son

by Steve Zeisler

Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain, reaches more than twenty-nine thousand feet above sea level. Everest was first conquered in 1953 by an expedition led by Sir Edmund Hillary. With a support crew of scores of Sherpa porters, and a string of base camps at strategic locations on the mountainside, the final assault party, consisting of Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, finally scaled the great peak that had defeated so many previous attempts.

At about nineteen thousand feet the human body reaches a point where it cannot adjust any further to the demands of rarefied air. Above that point, climbers must battle with lethargy, loss of appetite, mirages, etc. In recent years, however, climbers who call themselves superalpinists have climbed Mount Everest without porters or frequent base camps, even without bottled oxygen. In remarkable exhibitions of skill and stamina, those individuals defied exhaustion, hallucinations and avalanches. In August of this year, Roger Marshall scaled the mountain on his own. What an accomplishment-- to have scaled the great Everest alone, without help of any kind!

The twelfth chapter of the book of Hebrews calls upon Christians to respond to a very different kind of heroic adventure: to "run with endurance the race that is set before us." How much more glorious is this spiritual race than the great feats of endurance and athletic ability the world pays so much attention to! The inspiring challenge of spending all one's strength and mental discipline to reach earth's highest point pales beside the challenge to run with endurance the race of faith.

Hebrews 12:

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.

If we are to become involved in running any race, we must prepare carefully. We must plan everything from choosing running shoes to stretching and warmup exercises. In this race which Hebrews talks about we are given a number of thoughtful preparations to make so that we may run effectively. The eleventh chapter of the letter pays tribute to a number of Old Testament saints whose lives are highlighted as examples for us. Here then is the first way to prepare ourselves--by observing and emulating those witnesses who have gone before us. These men and women made the difficult choices to follow after the Lord, to seek his glory, and grow to maturity.

Before the birth of our first child, my wife Leslie and I took the Lamaze birth classes. We learned various breathing techniques which would help at the onset of labor pains, how my wife could cooperate with the process instead of resisting it, and how I could be a loving coach to her. At the end of the classes a few couples who had recently used this process during the birth of their children gave us glowing reports of their experiences, based on what they had learned in the class. Their testimony was that what they had learned in class was a great help to them when they faced the real thing.

All the "great cloud of witnesses" Abraham, Moses, Sarah, and others -- testify to us that the race is well worth running, and that it is worth running "with endurance." You have to be convinced by those who have gone before that the race of faith is worth finishing.

Secondly, in preparing to run the race, verse 1 says we must "lay aside every encumbrance." We must throw off any weights that burden us. It is very difficult to run a race if you are carrying extra weight on your back, if you are burdened, if there is something pressing down on your shoulders. I am convinced that the reference here is to the weight of guilt, the weight of sin we think is still attached to us. This is the weight of trying to be our own savior, the weight of trying to purify ourselves when the Lord Jesus has already done that for us. We are not responsible to make ourselves right before God: we are already right before him. We are not responsible to clean up and pay for sinful choices we have made: they have already been paid for. So we cannot run this race if we think we must be our own savior.

I recently read an interview of Colin Cook, the man who began the ministry Homosexuals Anonymous. He said he finally abandoned the gay world because he came to see that Jesus Christ was his righteousness and that his failure had been paid for. Because formerly he was carrying the weight of responsibility for what had already happened, he found himself vulnerable time and again to new sin. As long as he was under that tremendous burden (the past), he could not succeed in making the right choices the next day. We cannot run the race if we are carrying a weight that crushes us. We must throw it off, and we have the right to throw it off because of our great High Priest.

The next point of preparation for a Christian as he begins to run the race is this discussion of "the sin which so easily entangles us." Here the figure is not that of a weight that is pressing down on the athlete, but rather the problems that beset him during the race--the pitfalls of temptation that await to trip him and snag him. Sinful choices tempt us; pitfalls await us if we are not paying attention. It is not the burden of our past sin, but the opportunity for today's sin that will entangle us and trip us up. We need to be ruthless with what besets us. We must know our weaknesses well enough so that we avoid those pitfalls.

When I was about five or six years old I was running down the street one day with a 7--Up bottle in my hand. My untied shoelace tripped me up and the shattered bottle almost severed my thumb. I learned that I could not run with my shoelace untied. Here in Hebrews 12 we are told to prepare to run a race, realizing that our feet may become tangled. We may stumble and fall, victimized by today's temptation if we are not alert to it.

Lastly, in preparation for running this race, verse 2 tells us to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." This race demands a single focus for our attention. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke about an eye that is fixed on something, a single eye. He was referring there to the things we will treasure, choosing which master we will serve. Are we single--mindedly fixing our attention on the person and the work of Christ

Here is what Jesus said:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, [if your eye is single in its focus] your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches.

This is a figure of the spiritual world. We are either focused on our Lord and on his calling, or we are double-minded. We either have as the central desire of our lives Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, and all its implications for us, or we are succumbing to the temptation to look away from him. We cannot run the race that way. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters. You will either serve God or riches. If you find yourself less filled with concern for the things of God, it may very well be that your heart is treasuring something else.

So as we get ready to run the race, as we are doing our warmups, we have "a great cloud of witnesses" testifying that the race is worth running. We have thrown off the extra encumbrances, the things we do not need any longer. We are ready to run. We have tied our shoes and made ourselves aware of the pitfalls, the

entanglements, the possibilities of tripping that lay before us. And we have fixed our eyes on Christ. We are running by his strength and for his sake. That is the whole goal of the race.

Now the call is to run the race with endurance. Make no mistake, this race is not a sprint. It is a marathon that will last a lifetime. The critical word in this passage is the word endurance. Speaking of Jesus, verse 2 says, he "endured the cross, despising the shame." He did not quit. He did not call down a legion of angels, as was his right, to save him. He endured to the end. That is what we are called to do as we run the race-- to endure all the way to the end. That is what honors God.

Verses 3 and 4 tell us to "consider" Christ, to not only fix our eyes upon him as the one who has gone before us, as our source of strength and direction, but to think about him as well.

For consider [think about] Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by him; for those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives." It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

It is not enough to be merely prepared for the race, to put off our burdens, to tie our shoes, to be encouraged by the witnesses that have gone before, to have our eyes fixed on Christ, we should also be clear in our minds that the race will be difficult. We are enthusiastic to run now, perhaps, but honesty requires that we be told that the race will be pressure-filled and demanding.

Two kinds of hardships will pressure us as we are making our way in Christ's name. The first is mentioned in verse 3, where it says, Christ endured "hostility by sinners against Himself." Like Christ, we will suffer at times precisely because we are doing the right thing, because everything about our life and choices at that time is godly and honorable to the Lord, because we exhibit the fragrance of Christ and we are exactly where we should be. That is the vicious attack that crucified Christ. A world that hates him and what he stands for will at times lash out against us.

The second hardship we may face is the loving discipline of our Heavenly Father. That has a purpose to it. Remember the Scripture says that "all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." In fact, it is true that everything that befalls us, whether it be hostility or purposeful discipline, is superintended by a sovereign God who knows exactly what he is doing. So in whatever situation we find ourselves he ought to be our trust, although at times it will feel like we are being treated with hostility for no good reason except that we belong to Jesus. At other times it will seem that our Heavenly Father loves us enough to discipline us and that we can cooperate with the process. In either case we must run the race, continuing to put one foot in front of the other, our eyes fixed on Christ, running "with endurance the race that is set before us."

Let us think about the first of these categories for a moment. What is it like to suffer hostility by sinners against the truth? I have counseled in a number of family situations where one member of the family, perhaps the father, feels threatened by the love of his wife and children for their Lord, and he reacts with anger, lashing out in ridicule at what they believe. I have known converts to Christianity from other religions who have lost the love and support of their families, not because the new converts became unpleasant or arrogant, but because of their new allegiance to Christ. Dr. James Dobson, who served on the President's Commission on Pornography, has written of his experience since the publication of their report which has served to threaten a multi-- billion dollar industry in this country. Those who are profiting from pornography have personally

threatened his livelihood and his reputation, not because of any wrong he did, but because he did what was right. We may very well have to face similar circumstances.

How did Jesus deal with the hostility and viciousness directed against him? He looked beyond to the glory that was to come: "He endured the cross, despising the shame" because of the joy set before him. He knew that later his God would vindicate him, and that was enough. If what you have faced in terms of vicious hostility is less than that, then you have not been tested fully yet. God has been gracious enough not to demand the maximum of you, so you have that to be grateful for. Jesus knew where he was going. He knew that his Father was trustworthy. He knew about resurrection beyond death, and so "for the joy set before Him" he endured. He did not faint. He did not drop out of the race. So we fix our eyes on Jesus, we consider him and we make the same choice. That is what we are called on to do.

I want to make one comment on the phrase "he despised the shame" of the cross, before we move on. It is important to recognize that Jesus did not deceive himself that human beings ought to be treated unjustly. He did not try to adopt a frame of mind that says there is anything good about the vicious destruction of godliness. We do not have to talk ourselves into saying good people deserve to suffer, as if there is something wrong with righteousness. Jesus despised the shameful treatment of godly humanity, but that had to be so that sin would be paid for. But godly behavior did not deserve to be treated that way. Godliness does not deserve to be destroyed.

Jesus cried at the tomb of Lazarus, although he knew he was going to taring Lazarus to life again. It saddened our Lord that human beings should have to die. He despised the shame that saw righteous humanity executed. If we believe that human beings are valuable, and that righteous character should be honored, we do not have to agree with and find a good reason for mistreatment of those who are godly. But we may have to endure it. Jesus despised the shame of the cross, but he saw the joy before him and he was willing to go through with it. Sometimes it is our responsibility to accept ill-treatment. Because we are his, we have to take our lumps at times.

The other category of hardship, which we probably experience more frequently, is discipline. This category of difficulties that befall us during the race is, in fact, purposeful. If we will listencarefully we can even hear the voice of our Heavenly Father who is disciplining us. We can agree with him, and cooperate in the learning experience. It says in verse 5, "Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord." Do not treat it as valueless. Cooperate with it. Learn to hear the voice of your Heavenly Father who cares enough about you to make you what you really desire to be deep down. At times it will be difficult, even frightening. But there is something about us that needs to be changed and challenged.

Discipline is different than punishment. Jesus was punished for our sins, and Christians escape the punishment due to sin because he has paid that price. We will be disciplined, however. And discipline is always creative. Discipline always attempts to build something, having as its purpose beauty, maturity and success. It is the exercise of a parent for a child which says, "I want you to be all you can be, and if you keep on the path you are on you will not get there." Discipline does not arise out of a father's frustration. It is inadequate parenting when a parent comes home angry with his boss or angry at the way he has been treated in the world and takes it out on his children. That is not discipline. Discipline is always for the sake of the child. But it is experienced by the child as sorrowful and difficult.

Here in these verses God's discipline of us is laid alongside the discipline of a parent for a child. Think about what we are told here as we consider the discipline of our earthly parents. First, it says, if you have not been disciplined then you are not a son, but rather an illegitimate child. If you ever find a parent who cares not at all for his child, who leaves him on his own to do whatever he would do, what you have discovered is a bastard, an illegitimate child.

Unfortunately, we run into many of those throwaway children in the world today. They are the children of parents who are so committed to their own personal peace and affluence they don't care what becomes of their children. But those children are not sons; they are rejects, throwaways. At the funeral service of a young high school boy, a member of the local punk rock scene, who committed suicide earlier this year, there was a comperdium of letters, poems and remembrances written about him by his friends. Most of the kids in the

punk scene are throwaway kids. Nobody seems to care for them. As I was read those letters I was pained to see that two kids from my neighborhood contributed. They too were part of that scene, and-they viewed themselves as that kind of person. I know those two kids and they are throwaway kids. They are undisciplined and unloved. They are treated as illegitimate.

But here we see that if we do receive discipline from our Heavenly Father, that is evidence that he loves us. He will not allow us to grow up as arrogant prudes, with no possibility for joy, freedom or love. He wants to make us like Jesus Christ. He will not let us become profligate, greedy, and selfish. He will not let us become people who live as though escape from the world is the only value in life. He loves us too much to see that happen. So God restricts us, buffets us and demands of us what we do not want to hear. He makes us face things about ourselves we do not want to face. That is the loving activity of the Father who cares. If he did not care, we would not be children. The good news is that if we receive God's discipline we are his children.

Another part of the analogy here says that human fathers do what seems best to them. We remember our own fathers, klunking their way through parenting, getting it wrong a good bit of the time. I certainly see that in my own life as I try to figure out the best approach, calling the shots as I see them, making mistakes and having to go back and apologize later. Fathers have but their best understanding of an imperfect world to go by. Yet good fathers are respected by their children, even though they blow it as often as they succeed. How much more should we respect our Heavenly Father? How much more should we "be subject (in respect) to the Father of spirits and live"?

The outcome of God's discipline of us is in verse 11. Discipline seems to be sorrowful for the moment, not joyful, "yet for those who have been trained by it afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." Discipline produces training, and being trained in righteousness yields not only righteous character but inner peace also, the peaceful fruit, the strength, command, quietness, authority, the imperturbability that goes with being righteous. If we will listen to a Heavenly Father who is committed to making us something, if we will cooperate with him instead of quitting or regarding it lightly, we become righteous, and our lives are filled with peace, confidence and assurance.

The point is, we are running a race, and honesty requires that we say that the race is going to be hard because in the world there is a vicious antagonism to the things of God. When that happens we need, as Jesus did, to see the glory that is on the other side and not quit.

At other times the race is hard because our Heavenly Father is not going to let us grow into inadequate, foolish, self--centered and arrogant children. He wants us to be righteous, and so in our race we will experience buffeting and difficulty that comes from him because he wants to make something of us. But the race is still worth running. Indeed there is no more glorious task you can set for yourself. Climbing Mount Everest without oxygen or porters may be an impressive accomplishment, but it pales to nothing compared to the endeavor given us here, "that we might run with endurance the race set before us"; that we might be like those in Hebrews 11, "of whom the world is not worthy," so filled are we with the character of God. It is worth running the race.

There is another word of preparation in verses 12 and 13:

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

The author of Hebrews has already said to look at the cloud of witnesses, to throw off the burdens, to deal with the entanglements, to fix our eyes on Christ. But most of us have enfeeblements of various kinds. We have already quit and been turned aside and made mistakes along the way. So he is saying, "OK, it is time to run now. Starting today, strengthen the hands that are feeble. Bind up the lameness. Get your feet moving and start running again."

One of the most amazing things of the seven-game World Series this fall was the play of Boston's first baseman, Bill Buckner. he played the whole series although he had to go through serious surgery as soon as it

was over. He looked like a goose waddling around the bases. He had funny looking shoes and taped ankles. But, despite his lameness, he never quit because he thought the goal, competing for a World Championship and the money that went with it, was worth it. This afternoon Joe Montana is going to run out on the field at Candlestick Park, having had major surgery on his back less than two months ago. For the goal of money and personal prestige he is going to bind up his enfeeblements and get back in the fight.

What the Scripture says to us has infinitely more value than personal prestige or money. So do not let yourself off the hook. Do not let your enfeeblements keep you from the race. Get back in. Tape up your ankles. Find out where there is weakness. Help the one who is beside you. But let us get on with the race, throwing off our burdens, cutting off our entanglements, cheered on by the martyrs, fixing our eyes on Christ, strengthening our limbs. Let us get on with the race.

The apostle Paul is one of the most magnificent servants of God who ever lived. At any point in his life we can imagine him accomplish something beautiful and magnificent for Christ. But one of my favorite statements of all about him is the last thing he said about himself, in his second letter to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing." I feel the most beautiful thing about the apostle was his lifelong willingness to run to the end, so that he could say a short time before his execution, "I finished the course. I kept the faith."

I call on each one of us to be like Paul, to be able to say with our last breath to the next generation who will have to run the race, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith."

Catalog No. 4016
Hebrews 12:1-13
Thirteenth Message
Steve Zeisler
November 9, 1986

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