

Hebrews 12:1-2
Additional Reading: Psalm 25

Introduction

Here we come to an extremely well known verse of Scripture, and one of the most moving passages in the New Testament. The writer gives a most attractive and valuable description of the Christian life. He sees the Christian life as a race, the spectators encourage, handicaps have to be overcome, and inspiration and help is available as we run.

The Christian Life as a race

Let us run with patience the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1). Not an unconcerned stroller along the highway of life, but one travelling along the high road. Not a tourist returning each evening to the same place he set off from that morning, but rather he is a pilgrim who is ever on the way. A race track has a start and a finish. This race starts at the Cross, and ends with a crown. The aim is in view. It is not the aim of making a fortune, enjoying oneself, learning a profession – but to do the will of God and be conformed to the image of Christ. This is the supreme end. Lesser aims will be tolerated only so far as they contribute to this supreme end. In this way we are like Christ, whose aim was to do God's will and to finish His work. **"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."** (John 4:34).

God has appointed the path, the track has been set before us. The course has been staked out and determined by the judge of the contest. Our duties at home, at work and in the church are appointed by God. Circumstances are also appointed by God – fences to be climbed, barriers to be surmounted, ditches to be crossed. How that would change our outlook on things, if we regarded life like that.

Steady progress to be maintained, so there is continual advance. Unless there is progress, there is something wrong with our Christianity. Am I further on than I was this day last year, or ten or twenty years ago? Have I developed in my likeness to God and communion with Him? We are meant to be getting on, making progress, getting somewhere.

Effort and perseverance is needed to run the race with patience. R.S.V. uses the word "perseverance", N.E.B. translates it "resolution". The Greek υπομονη means "determination". We will face difficulties and hard places, delays, discouragements and obstacles. But must go steadily on, and refuse to be put off.

So the Christian life is a race – it has an aim, God has appointed the path, progress must be made, perseverance is required.

Encouragement

We also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). This is an unseen cloud of witnesses in two senses – they witness our performance, and they also have witnessed to us about Christ.

In the first sense, the picture is of a vast stadium, and in the centre is the race-track. All around are row upon row of spectators, gazing intently on the performance of the runners. Thrilling thought that those who have gone before are interested in us and keenly watch our performance. How this spurs us on to renewed effort. How keen we are not to disappoint them.

Then in the second sense of this phrase, we have those who have been witnesses *to* us, as well as *of* us. They have gone before and we look at their lives and find many things to encourage us in the race. Their lives and stories shine across the centuries and tell us of how good it is to trust God and how small and transient are our troubles. We can look at the hard fights, doubts, troubles, enemies, hardships, sorrows they endured, but their faith held, God's grace upheld them, and they finished gloriously. They demonstrate how mighty a life of faith is.

They are proof of how human weakness can be filled with power of God. God's mighty hand was on them. Their lives are a witness that whoever trusts the Lord will have strength according to his need. The Lord never failed them. He led and upheld them. Even their sins can be an encouragement – Noah, Samson, David – men of common day. We easily despair because of our sins. We can look at their lives and see that despite failures they knew God's forgiving and restoring grace.

This great cloud of witnesses – we read of them in the Bible, and also in the great story of the church – Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Livingstone. And what of those who have not made the pages of literature - think of those who have worshipped here – who have witnessed your performance, and whose lives have witnessed to you that you serve a faithful God.

Handicaps to be overcome

If we are encircled by all the great ones of the past, we are also encircled by the handicap of our own sin at present. **Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us** (Hebrews 12:1) No man can reach greatness when he is burdened down. If we would travel far, we must travel light. The athlete would shed his outer cloak as he went to the starting mark. Whatever held him back had to go. Whatever prevented him running as swiftly as possible had to be put aside.

Essential duty of Christian to discard everything which prevents us being the best we can be for the Lord. Whatever holds us back must go. "Sin which does so easily beset us", *not* "besetting sin". Bigger picture here – all sin, in all its forms, standing round us, dragging our footsteps, crowding round us, stopping us going forward. Daily must thrust aside this constant obstacle.

And "every weight" involves everything which pulls us back in the Christian race. This could be things not sinful in themselves, but which hinder us – habits, pleasures, friendships which hold us back and hold us down, something which in moderation helps us, but in excess hinders us. What is a weight to someone may not be a weight

to someone else. For example, cricket – while for one person this may become a hindrance if it keeps him away from church and fellowship, others have combined cricketing career with the Christian life successfully. If we recognise a weight as a hindrance and do nothing about it, the result is sin. If it hinders us, it is a weight. If it continues to be a tolerated weight, it is a sin. Small and useful rhyme:

*“Whatever impairs the reason,
Hardens conscience,
Clouds vision of God,
Spoils relish for spiritual things,
That to me is sin”*

Inspiration and help we may receive

Looking unto Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). ἀφοπώντες literally means “looking off”, or “looking away” to Jesus, and looking away from everything else. Never mind the obstacles in the way, what others are doing or think, or our sense of weakness. Look away to Jesus, **the author and the finisher of our faith**. ἀρχηγός, translated here as “author”, is the same word used in Acts 3:15 as “Prince of life”, in Acts 5:31 as “Prince and Saviour”, in Hebrews 2:10 as “captain of our salvation”.

Could we understand it as originator or example? Both would be true. Jesus certainly was an example of faith. We often forget the emphasis He gave to His duties and His dependence on His Father, His perfect trust and obedience to God. Hence His peace and calm. He was an example to us in the way He endured the Cross with His eye on the joy that would be His. The way He ran His race undeniably makes Him an example and leader for all who live by faith.

Yet also could understand the word “author” as originator of our faith, because it all began with Him. He is also the finisher – He will bring all to a triumph issue. He gives grace to perfect faith in our lives, and will crown and reward it at the end. Thus He enables us to copy His example, gives us the will and the power to be like Him in attitude of faith. He gives us not merely an example, but the strength too.

At the end of the race we shall see Him as He is. Running the race does not require clenching teeth and doing best, but looking away to Jesus as originator, example, enabler, and prize of faith. The beginning, middle and end of the race are all taken up with Christ. He is the starter, companion on the way, and goal at the end. The one who sets us off, the one with whom we travel, and the one whom we must go to meet.

“Christ the path, and Christ the prize”

In Jesus we find life, light, guidance and joy. What an encouragement and help

Conclusion

The race the Christian runs has an aim, God has appointed the path, requires progress and effort. We are encouraged as we run the race by a great many witnesses, who both watch us and witness to us. The handicaps of weights and sins must be put aside. We can call on the help of Jesus – as we keep our eyes on Him, the author and finisher.