

Mid Week • Hebrews 12

INTRODUCTION

As we saw in our study last Wednesday – Chapter 11 of Hebrews is a virtual Hall of Faith and Fame.

It's the Biblical *Cooperstown* for the heroes of the Faith.

The writer's purpose for mentioning all the people he does is to remind his readers that what made them special was their *persevering faith* in God.

Now in chapter 12, he draws the conclusion: What made the people of chapter 11 heroic was their steadfast faith in God in the face of *opposition* and *difficulty*.

God was giving *them* the very same opportunity!

As Jewish followers of Jesus Christ, they had received the promise the earlier heroes had only been able to look forward to – the Messiah.

Now they had entered in to what the people of chapter 11 could only *hope* for – so they must now step up and be *worthy* of the legacy of faith that had been handed to them by their heroes – even though to do so would mean the hostility and hatred of the world and of their fellow Jews.

As the writer moves to apply that now in chapter 12, he uses some of the most stirring words of the entire NT.

CHAPTER 12

¹Therefore we also,

Just like all those faithful of chapter 11 -

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

Meaning all those men and women of the past who have lived their lives by faith in God and have entered in to their rest -

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, ²looking 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.

The writer presents the picture of an athletic competition.

The Greeks had introduced to the world the idea of athletic games in which stadiums were built and people would sit in the stands and watch while athletes engaged in various kinds of competition.

Our modern Olympic Games are the direct descendant of these ancient competitions.

The image of athletic competition used by the author here is another solid evidence that the Apostle Paul is the *author* of Hebrews.

This is an image he used often – of athletic games as a picture of the Christian life and struggle.

The author paints the picture of a stadium whose stands are filled with spectators.

They are those men and women of God who have completed *their* race and have taken a seat.

They're then cheering on the readers who are the competitors on the field, each one engaged in their own race.

The competition is not against one another as though God only hands out the reward to whatever Christian does the best.

Each one is running their own race – which is more like a steeplechase.

Are you familiar with the steeplechase?

It's a race in which the athletes have to run around the track and jump over obstacles of varying heights and with traps in front of and behind them – like water or hedges.

It's an interesting combination of hurdles, sprint and endurance.

Like no other footrace, it demands concentration and perseverance.

That's the picture here – but the field is not of 8 runners all competing against each other.

No – in this race, each is running on their own, and the goal is simply to complete the course without bowing out or getting knocked out by one of the hurdles or traps.

In that sense, it's a bit like the TV show, *Fear Factor* in which a field of some 6 to 8 people face really bizarre and sometimes

gross challenges to see who will win.

For the competitors, the first challenges are more about overcoming their own fear than competing against one another. Here we have the stands packed with the saints of the past who cheer us on as we run the race set before us.

Now, are we to understand this *literally* – that the dearly departed are sitting in some kind of heavenly gallery and watching us, actually cheering when we're doing well, and moaning when we stumble and fall?

Is it the old, thrill of victory and the agony of defeat as they watch?

Most Bible scholars believe that the writer means this *merely figuratively*; that what he means is that we have their *example* before us urging us on and that we ought not picture the saints as actually *watching* us as we live here below.

But I wonder if the saints don't in fact check in on us every now and then and celebrate our victories and lament our stumbles. After all, we read that the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents and come to faith in Christ.

Peter tells us that the angles themselves are intently observing us and watching the unfolding work of God's grace in our lives.

If angels are watching us, why not the departed saints?

But I don't think they sit there in rapt attention to us.

Certainly the majority of their time is spent gazing on the face of God and worshipping Him!

Tell me - if you had the choice of watching the fishing channel or the brand new Star Wars movie, which would you chose?

Certainly we'd chose the movie because it is far more interesting!

However the writer means us to understand the cloud of witnesses here – as merely figurative or literal, the point is that each of us has a race to run and this race is shared by all who look to God in faith.

Using the image of athletic competition, he encourages us to set aside any and everything that would hinder us from finishing our course with all due attention.

He says . . .

let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us,

He makes a distinction here between *weights* and *sin*.

A weight is anything that gets in the way of pursuing God wholeheartedly.

There are lots of things in the world that aren't sinful or immoral in and of themselves, but they can get in the way of our attention to the Lord.

Career, possessions, food, popularity, wealth, even the pursuit of health or happiness can get in the way.

These things in and of themselves are neutral and can be either good or bad, depending on how they factor into our lives.

It's God's intent that all these things would be vehicles and avenues through which our pursuit of Him might be lived out.

But if we lose focus and misplace our priorities, then they can easily become weights that get in the way.

Take for instance my home.

A home ought to be a place of safety and peace – a refuge that produces a sense a security because it is built on faith in Christ.

It's the center of where a husband and wife grow in their intimacy with one another to become the one-flesh that's the goal of their marriage.

It's the base in which a man learns to love like Christ loves the church and where a woman learns to defer as the Church does to Christ.

It's a place of *nurture* where parents learn to raise their children by following the model of our Heavenly Father with us.

It's a place of *hospitality* where visitors come face to face with the love and grace of God.

In it's *furnishing*, a home ought to reflect the proportion and beauty of God.

In it's *upkeep*, it ought to reflect the order and holiness of heaven.

In all I do regarding my home, it ought to be an *outgrowth* and *reflection* of my relationship with the Lord.

But if my attention to my house becomes centered on having to have the latest furnishings and appliances so I can impress others and make them envious – then it's become a *weight* that retards my spiritual progress.

If I neglect time with the Lord or attention to my wife, children, or friends, because I am so busy endlessly decorating – then my house has become a *hindrance* that slows my momentum in Christ.

Have you noticed the get-ups modern Olympic athletes wear?

The running suits are super-lightweight nylon shells that look like they are spray-painted on!

The other day I was in the shoe store and looked at some of the new competitive running shoes. They were 5½ oz.!!!

Runners today try to divest themselves of every unnecessary ounce of weight so they can better their time.

We need to have that kind of mindset when it comes to our spiritual growth.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 6:12 . . .

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful.

All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

Then in 1 Corinthians 10:23 he said it again –

**All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful;
all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.**

Meaning not all things advance him in his course of knowing and pleasing God.

What neutral or even good things in your life actually get in the way of your pursuit of Christ?

Has your career, car, house, hobby, presented a challenge to your walk?

Is there a store, web-site, friend, that weighs you down?

Lay it aside!

When the writer says “lay aside” he is using the term ancient Greek

athletes used when they prepared for competition.

And you know how they competed don't you?

They stripped naked!

The writer's point was that our attitude about laying aside hindrances has to be *radical!*

Suppose one day you go to watch a track competition at the LA Coliseum.

The runners line up, take off their warm-ups and kneel down to re-tie their shoes.

All they are wearing is those skimpy little hi-tech running suits.

All is ready for the race when suddenly we see another fellow coming to the starting line *fully dressed*.

He has on a full suit, heavy overcoat, hip boots and a heavy woolen cap.

In his hands he carries his lunch bucket and an umbrella.

His pockets are filled with medicines.

One of the judges of the race approaches him and asks, "Sir, are you planning on running *this* race?"

He says that indeed he is.

The judge says that his clothing is highly unusual.

But he replies, "What's wrong with what I wear? Is anything wrong with a coat or cap or medicines? After all, the race is long, the terrain is treacherous, and I may become ill. I'm going prepared for whatever may lie ahead."

His clothing is no violation of the rules of the race and he can certainly chose to attempt to run that way – but one thing is certain – he's not likely to win, let alone finish the race.

Why? Because he is loaded with *weights*.

Besides weights, we need to divest ourselves of *every sin* that would seek to trip us up and send us sprawling in the dirt.

Weight merely slows us down – sin wants to actually disqualify us and drag us off the track altogether.

The word "ensnare" in the NKJ version is "beset" in the Older KJ.

It's from this we get the idea of a *besetting sin* – a sin which seems to hang on though we loath it.

It's that thing with which we struggle constantly and can't seem to shake.

The word means to *surround* and presents the picture of a man who sits in front of a fire in the middle of the jungle while a beast of prey circles just beyond the circle of light, waiting for an opportunity to jump in and attack.

Or in this case, of a garment like a bathrobe that encircles the legs and trips the runner.

Realizing the author is telling us to *lay aside* besetting sin, we ask the question – but how?

A besetting sin is just that, something we *loathe*, something we *abhor* but can't seem to put down.

And yet, the language here is precise and simple – for you see, the phrase “let us lay aside” is in the *aorist* tense which refers to a once for all action!

The author is challenging his readers with taking those things that have been annoying them and getting in the way of their bold and faithful pursuit of Christ and in a definitive moment of time to set them aside and press on with all due vigilance and determination to follow the Lord.

He knows the quandary this challenge will present his readers so he doesn't stop there – he goes to show them *how* to set aside besetting sin . . .

and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking 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.

The key to overcoming besetting sin is to keep your eyes fixed on the prize!

You know why you and I give in to temptation and yield to sin?

Because we shift our attention from God to the thing we're being tempted with!

Think about it – every time we sin, what we are doing is *choosing* to invest greater desire in the sin than in the Lord!

At the moment we fall, we desire the object of the temptation *more* than God.

Now, when we think about it, sitting here in Wednesday night bible study, dispassionately at a distance from actual temptation, we realize how utterly *absurd* this is – but it's what happens!

And proves my long held contention – SIN MAKES ME STUPID!

Example: A man discovers that a wealthy relative has died and he's become heir to a diamond mine.

As he's on his way to take a look at the mine for the first time, he sits next to a man on the plane who offers him a share in a *brick factory* in exchange for the diamond mine.

He pulls a brick out of his briefcase and says – “Here, you can have this right now if you'll just sign over the deed to your diamond mine.”

Would the man be smart to make the trade? No Way!

But that is precisely what *we do* when we trade in the riches of seeking Christ for the mud bricks of this world!

If we think about the Fall in the Garden of Eden, we realize the path every temptation and sin take.

Why did Eve give in and yield?

Her attention to the Lord was *sidetracked* by the suggestion of the devil.

We read that Eve stopped to *consider* the temptation, *looked* at the forbidden fruit, and was attracted to it.

In other words, *first* she decided to *suspend faith* in what God said about the whole affair.

Then she *fixed her attention* on the object of the temptation.

One bad choice led to another till the truth of the matter was lost to sight and her desire FOR THE FRUIT outweighed her desire for the Lord.

This is precisely what happens to us when we yield to sin – every single time!

The difference with *besetting sins* is that because of repetition, the first part of this process is already done in our minds.

We've developed a *habit* of just jumping straight to the point of

looking at and desiring the sin.
Because we've given in so often – we've fallen into a pattern of
losing sight of God in favor of the sin.
The temptation seems so close and God so distant.
Even the Noontime sun can be eclipsed by my thumb if I hold
it close enough to my eye.

The writer tells us *how* to lay aside besetting sin.
We must keep our eyes fixed on the prize!
We must make a choice – a definitive, once for all decision that no
matter what, we're going to keep our eyes on Christ and not
become distracted by anything, specially the temptation to a
besetting sin.
Just as the heroes of the past kept their eyes fixed on their reward, we
must keep our eyes fixed on ours.
And that's why he says at the end of v. 1, "let us run with endurance
the race that is set before us."
We need to have the mindset that we're in this for the *long-haul*.
We're not just fair-weather friends of Jesus who will follow Him
as long as it's easy or until a better alternative shows up.
If a runner is going to run a 10 K or a marathon, she doesn't go out of
the house with the idea of doing a couple of wind-sprints up and
down the block and then quit.
She psyches herself up for a long run and hits the street pacing
herself so that she can reach the end.
The Christian life is a *marathon*, not a sprint.
It requires a tough-minded determination to endure and persevere
through the inevitable obstacles of a race course that lies
through a world that will do just about anything it can to take
us out of the race.
One thing about a long-distance runner – they know where the end of
the race is and every stride is aimed in that direction!
You and I need to do that too – we need to keep our eyes on the
prize, on the goal, which is Jesus Christ who stands at the finish
line, ready to hand us our prize.
Don't get sidetracked.
Watch out for the potholes.
Strip off anything that would get in the way of running

unhindered.

And remember, even Jesus, in running His race endured opposition and hardship.

But He now has finished His race and awaits us in glory.

Blondin was a famous tightrope walker of some time ago.

His claim to fame was walking over Niagara Falls on a slender rope from shore to shore.

He never faltered or failed. But Blondin had a secret.

As he made his way over the rope, he would keep his eyes fixed on a large silver star which he had erected at the far end.

The star was the center of his attention and guided him to the other side.

In running our race, we must look to our bright and morning Star, the Lord Jesus.

He's run the race ahead of us to scope out the course and make sure ours can be negotiated safely

And now He bids us to run, keeping our eyes fixed on Him.

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

The chief obstacle the readers were facing was the hostility of their Jewish brethren who opposed the Faith and rejected the gospel.

The writer reminds them that if the Lord Himself faced their hostility and hatred, they could expect no better treatment.

In fact, counting the cost ahead of time is an important part of following the Lord.

Returning to the analogy of running a long race – if a runner thinks only about the end and the prize waiting at the finish line and doesn't remember that there's a long track prior to the completion, then when he encounters the first challenge, he's likely to bow out. A long race includes the feeling of being winded, possible side-aches, sore muscles, blisters, fatigue, sweat, pain, thirst, hunger, nausea, more pain, and the constant temptation to just pull off to the side and quit!

The runner knows all about these challenges and mentally accepts them ahead of time and determines that when these things arise,

they will keep putting one foot in front of the other!
And that's what we have to do as Christians!
The Christian life is one that is going to face a lot of opposition
and trial – it's a trail of trial!
But we make a decision ahead of time that come what may –
we're not going to fall out of the race!
We're going to keep on keeping on till the very end!

**4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against
sin. 5 And you have forgotten the exhortation which
speaks to you as to sons:**

***“My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD,
Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;***

**6 *For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges
every son whom He receives.”***

While blood *had been* shed in the earliest days of the church, it seems
that after that initial wave of persecution at the hands of Saul and
his associates, things had cooled down and the persecution that
Christians faced was now less physical and more subtle.

When the writer says, “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed,
striving against sin,” the sin he's referring to is the sin of
denying Christ and reverting back to Judaism.

Then He reminds them that they must look *beyond* the simple
expression of trial to the ultimate cause *behind* it.

While the *agents* of trouble were Jews who rejected Christ, the
ultimate author had to be the Lord Himself, for He is in control
of all things.

The Lord was *allowing* the trial to accomplish something in them,
and that could not possibly be their falling away!

No – it's clear – they were being pressed because God was *correcting*
them.

The persecution they were enduring was the *tool* God was using to
discipline them.

The writer quotes Proverbs 3 and reminds them that a loving father
applies discipline and correction to his erring child.

As the children of God, they must learn to look at trouble as part
of God's work to mold and shape them into the image of

Christ.

Charles Spurgeon looked back upon dark hours in his own life and said:

“I bear willing witness that I owe more to the fire, and the hammer, and the file, than to anything else in my Lord's workshop. I sometimes question whether I have ever learned anything except through the rod. When my schoolroom is darkened, I see most.”

7If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? 8But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. 9Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected *us*, and we paid *them* respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? 10For they indeed for a few days chastened *us* as seemed *best* to them, but He for *our* profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. 11Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

These verse really don't need much comment for the writer's intent and meaning are crystal clear.

Discipline aims at correcting error and weaning us off all that within us that leads to loss and ruin, and building *within* us those virtues and traits that produce good.

As my children go through life and demonstrate behavior that if left uncorrected will lead to their own destruction and possibly even harm for others, it's my duty as a loving father to correct and discipline them.

I will use whatever means are necessary to make sure they realize the error of their ways and are lead to a heart-decision to *change* and replace sinful attitudes and actions with right ones.

I realize that the process of discipline is hard, often painful – but *love demands* that I keep an eye on the future of my child and where present attitudes and behaviors will lead *if* they aren't confronted.

If I, a mere human father, realize the appropriateness of consistent loving discipline in the raising of my children, how much more ought I recognize and expect the work of the Spirit in my life as the Father lovingly moves to wean me off my sinful attitudes and behavior through discipline?

In v. 10, the writer focuses the work of spiritual discipline on the production of one over-arching spiritual trait – *holiness!*

Famous author and founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, A.B. Cooper said that one autumn day he went to a chrysanthemum show and observed some wonderful blooms. He inquired of a gardener, "How in the world do you manage to produce such marvelous flowers?"

The man replied, "Well, sir, we concentrate all the strength of the plant in one or two blooms. If we would allow it to bear all the flowers it could, none would be worth showing. If you want a prize specimen, you must be content with a single chrysanthemum instead of a score."

For the same reason, God sends trials to prune from our lives the useless blooms of self, popularity, and comfort, so that He may perfect in us one exquisite white blossom of holiness.

That the writer felt compelled to remind his readers of this truth is evidence of that fact that when a child is disciplined, they can respond in one of two ways –

- 1) they can *resent* their parent,
- 2) or they can yield and accept the discipline as motivated by love and a larger, wiser plan than they can see.

I must admit that there have been times when I did not measure out the discipline of my children in the proper manner.

I've been angry and instead of taking the time to go over *why* I was correcting them I just plowed ahead and applied the chastening.

And there have been times when my children have responded with defiance and a less than compliant demeanor.

The noises they make, the hand trying to grab the wooden spoon, the look!

These things all remind me that I have failed to help them realize the reason WHY I am chastening them is *their* error, *their* sin!

You see, correction and chastening will fail miserably if the child doesn't *make the connection* between their current *pain* and their foolish *choices*.

It's imperative that they realize the chastening is the *result* of their choices – not my anger or desire to inflict pain.

My careful communication with my son or daughter, helping them realize WHY they are being corrected and that it is my love for them and hope for their success at living that dictates my application of discipline – is critical in keeping them from having a wrong view of me as their father.

That's what the writer is doing here – reminding his readers that the reason they are going through trials is because the Lord, in His love, is chastening them so that they will be refined and made pure.

Therefore, they must not allow themselves to be lied to by the devil that trouble means God has abandoned them or that He despises them.

God is not a sadist who delights in inflicting torment on His children.

He is a loving Father who desires the very best, and has pledged Himself to that end.

12Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be *dislocated*, but rather be healed.

The author is very much like an excellent coach at half-time.

The team is sitting in the team room with their heads hanging low because they're getting whooped on the field.

They're behind 42-0, but the coach says, "Okay team, you've been playing like a bunch of half-hearted, aimless losers. The stands

are packed with family and friends and they're cheering you on but you're all wandering around out there as if in a daze. This is *football* we're playing and the other team has been wiping the field with us.

I know you! I know what you're capable of! And though we're behind by 42 points, I know you can go out there and win this game.

So lift up your heads, think about who and what you are, and go out there and play some football!"

As the players listen to this, they perk up and get energized. They look around the room at those who's head are still hanging low because they've played so poorly so far in the game.

They go over and start provoking them.

And pretty soon the whole room is pumped up and ready to go out and win the game.

Some of the Jewish Christians had given in to the pressure and were in danger of falling away.

They were weak and feeble and had stopped following Christ.

The writer urges the readers to go to them and encourage them to renew their walk and get back in the race.

CONCLUSION

Who do you know who's seemingly dropped out of the race?

Who do you know who's grown tired of the wind in their face or the potholes in the road and has maybe gone sprawling in the dirt of the track?

Go to them, and encourage them to get back in to the race.

The best way to do that is make sure *you* are running with all your might, staying focused on the prize and wary of anything that would hinder your course.

Let me end with this story:

On August 7, 1954 during the British Empire Games in Vancouver, Canada, one of the greatest mile match-ups in history took place. The only 2 men to break a 4-minute mile were to compete against each other – Roger Bannister and John Landy in a race that was billed as the "*Miracle Mile*."

Both men were in peak condition – it was the prime of their

competitive careers.

Landy led by a couple strides through most of the race and Bannister was forced to alter his strategy just to keep up.

During the 3rd lap, Landy started to pull away and Bannister was forced to start his kick earlier than he wanted to.

Then came one of track history's most famous moments:

One stride away from the home stretch, with the noise of the crowd filling the athletes' ears, Landy, who couldn't hear Bannister's footfalls, glanced over his shoulder to see where his opponent was.

That backward glance was all it took for his momentum to falter and Bannister shot by.

Roger Bannister ended up winning the race by 5 yards!

Landy's lapse serves as a modern example of what the author of Hebrews has warned us against.

We must run with endurance the race that is set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ!

Those who look away from Christ will never finish well.

For Christianity IS Christ!

He is the Center and Circumference- or as the writer says it here –

He is the Author and the Finisher of our faith.

As the song says - It's all about You, Jesus! It's all about You!