

Keep Your Eyes On The Prize • Hebrews 12:1-2

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Miracle Mile*

1. On August 7, 1954 during the *British Empire Games* in Vancouver, Canada, one of the greatest mile match-ups in history took place.
2. 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*.”
3. Both men were in peak condition – it was the prime of their competitive careers.
4. Landy led by a couple strides through most of the race and Bannister was forced to alter his strategy just to keep up.
4. During the 3rd lap, Landy started to pull away and Bannister was forced to start his kick earlier than he wanted to.
5. Then came one of track history’s most famous moments:
 - a. 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.
 - b. that backward glance was all it took for his momentum to falter and Bannister shot by.
 - c. Roger Bannister ended up winning the race by 5 yards!
6. Landy’s lapse serves as a poignant example of what the author of Hebrews exhorts us about in Hebrews 12.

B. *Setting The Context*

1. Let’s set the context for what we’re looking at this morning . . .
2. Chapter 11 of Hebrews is a virtual Hall of Fame.
3. It’s the Biblical *Cooperstown* for the heroes of the Faith.
4. The writer’s purpose for mentioning all the people he does in chapter 11 is to remind his readers that *what* made them heroic was their *persevering faith* in God.
5. Now in chapter 12, he draws the conclusion:
 - a. God was giving the readers of this letter the very same opportunity their heroes had had -

- b. to persevere in their faith in God in the face of opposition and trial.
- c. you see, as Jewish followers of Jesus Christ, they were being pressured by their fellow Jews to renounce their faith in Christ and revert to the Judaism of their past.
- d. the writer of Hebrews encourages them to press on in faith and follow in the footsteps of those men and women of God who had passed the torch on to them.
- e. here in chapter 12, he uses some of the most inspiring words of the entire NT.

II. TEXT

A. V. 1-2

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

2 looking 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.

1. The writer paints the picture of an *athletic competition*.
2. The Greeks had introduced athletic games to the world.
 - a. they built special stadiums where competitions were held.
 - b. people would sit in the stands and watch while athletes engaged in various events.
3. Our modern Olympic Games are the direct descendant of these ancient athletic competitions.
4. Here, the author paints the picture of a stadium whose stands are *filled* with spectators.
 - a. they are those men and women of God who have completed *their* race and have taken a seat in the stands.
 - b. they're then cheering on the readers who are the competitors on the field, each one engaged in their own race.
 - c. the competition is not against one another as though God only hands out the reward to whatever Christian does the best.

- d. each one is running their own race – which is like a *steeplechase*.
5. Are you familiar with the steeplechase?
 - a. it's a race in which the athletes have to run around the track and jump over obstacles of varying heights with traps in front of and behind them – like water or hedges.
 - b. it's an interesting combination of hurdles, sprint and endurance.
 - c. like no other footrace, it demands concentration and perseverance.
 6. That's the picture here – but the field is not of just 8 runners all competing against each other.
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.
 - c. for the competitors, the first challenges are more about overcoming their *own* fear than competing against one another.
 7. Here we have the stands packed with the saints of the past who cheer us on as we run the race set before us.
 8. Now, are we to understand this *literally* – that the dearly departed are sitting in some kind of heavenly gallery watching us, actually cheering when we're doing well, and moaning when we stumble and fall?
 9. Most Bible scholars believe that the writer means this *merely figuratively*; that what he means is that we have the *example of past faithfulness* before us urging us on and that we ought not picture the saints as actually *watching* us as we live here below.
 10. But I wonder if the saints don't in fact check in on us every now and then and urge us on.
 - a. after all, we read that the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents and come to faith in Christ. [Luke 15:7, 10]
 - b. Peter tells us that the angels themselves are intently observing us and watching the unfolding work of God's grace in our lives. [1 Peter 1:12]
 - c. if angels are watching us, why not the departed saints?
 - d. but I don't think they sit there in rapt attention to us.

- 1) certainly the majority of their time is spent gazing on the face of God and worshipping Him!
 - 2) tell me - if you had the choice of watching the fishing channel or the brand new Star Wars movie, which would you chose?
 - 3) we'd choose the movie because it is far more interesting!
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. He says . . .

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

14. He makes a distinction here between *weights* and *sin*.
15. A *weight* is anything that gets in the way of pursuing God whole-heartedly.
- a. 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.
 - b. career, possessions, food, popularity, wealth, even the pursuit of health or happiness can get in the way.
 - c. these things in and of themselves are neutral and can be either good or bad, depending on how they factor into our lives.
 - d. it's God's intent that all these things would be *vehicles* and *avenues* through which our pursuit of Him might be *lived out*.
 - e. but if we lose focus and misplace our priorities, they can easily become weights that get in the way.
 - f. take for instance my home.
 - 1) a home ought to be a place of safety and peace – a refuge that produces a sense a security because it's built on faith in Christ.
 - 2) God intends it to be 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.

- 3) 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.
 - 4) it's a place of *nurture* where parents learn to raise their children by following the example of our Heavenly Father with us.
 - 5) it's a place of *hospitality* where visitors come face to face with the love and grace of God.
 - 6) in it's *furnishing*, a home ought to reflect the proportion and beauty of God.
 - 7) in it's *upkeep*, it ought to reflect the order and holiness of heaven.
 - 8) in all I do regarding my home, it ought to be an *outgrowth* and *reflection* of my relationship with the Lord.
 - 9) 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.
 - 10) 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.
16. Have you noticed the get-ups modern Olympic athletes wear?
- a. the running suits are super-lightweight nylon shells that look like they're spray-painted on!
 - b. the other day I was in the shoe store and looked at some of the new competitive running shoes. They were 5½ oz.!!!
 - c. runners today try to divest themselves of every unnecessary ounce of weight so they can better their time.
 - d. we need to have that kind of mindset when it comes to our spiritual growth.
17. 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.**

- a. 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.

- b. meaning not all things advance him in his course of knowing and pleasing God.
18. When the writer says “lay aside” he’s using the term ancient Greek athletes used when they prepared for competition.
- a. and you know how they competed don’t you?
 - b. they stripped naked!
 - c. the writer’s point was that our attitude about laying aside hindrances has to be *radical*!
19. Suppose one day you go to watch a track competition at the LA Coliseum.
- a. the runners line up, take off their warm-ups and kneel down to re-tie their shoes.
 - b. all they are wearing is those skimpy little hi-tech running suits.
 - c. all is ready for the race when suddenly we see another fellow coming to the starting line *fully dressed*.
 - d. he has on a full suit, heavy overcoat, hip boots and a heavy woolen cap.
 - e. in his hands he carries his lunch bucket and an umbrella.
 - f. his pockets are filled with medicines.
 - g. one of the judges of the race approaches him and asks, “Sir, are you planning on running *this* race?”
 - h. he says that indeed he is.
 - i. the judge says that his clothing is highly unusual.
 - j. 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.”
 - k. his clothing is no violation of the rules of the race and he can certainly choose to attempt to run that way –
 - l. but one thing is certain – he’s not likely to win, let alone finish the race.
 - m. why? Because he is loaded with *weights*.
20. What neutral or even good things in your life are getting in the way of your pursuit of Christ?
- a. has your career, car, house, or hobby presented a challenge to your walk?
 - b. is there a store, web-site, or friend that weighs you down?

- c. lay it aside!
- 21. Besides weights, we need to divest ourselves of *every sin* that would seek to trip us up and send us sprawling in the dirt.
 - a. weight merely slows us down –
 - b. sin wants to *disqualify* us and *drag us off* the track altogether.
- 22. The word “ensnare” in the NKJ version is translated as “beset” in the Older KJ.
 - a. it’s from this we get our idea of a *besetting sin* –
 - b. a sin which seems to hang on though we loath it.
 - c. it’s that thing we struggle with but can’t seem to shake.
- 23. The word “ensnare” 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.
- 24. Realizing the author is telling us to *lay aside* besetting sin, we ask the question – but how?
 - a. a besetting sin is just that, something we *loath*, something we *abhor* but can’t seem to put down.
 - b. 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!
 - c. let me translate it this way – “Be done, once and for all, with habitual sin!”
 - d. easier said than done – wouldn’t you agree?
- 25. 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 setting them aside and pressing on with all due vigilance and determination to follow the Lord.
- 26. 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 . . .

B. The Key

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.

1. The key to overcoming besetting sin is to keep your eyes fixed on the prize!
2. You know why you and I give in to temptation and yield to sin?
 - a. because we shift our attention from God to the thing we're being tempted with!
 - b. think about it – every time we sin, what we are doing is *choosing* to invest greater desire in the sin than in the Lord!
 - c. at the moment we fall, we desire the object of the temptation *more* than God.
 - d. now, when we think about it, sitting here in church on Sunday morning, dispassionately at a distance from actual temptation, we realize how utterly *absurd* this is – but it's what happens!
 - e. and proves my long held contention – SIN MAKES ME STUPID!
3. Let me use an example . . .
 - a. a man discovers that a wealthy relative has died and he's become heir to a diamond mine.
 - b. 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.
 - c. 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.”
 - d. would the man be smart to make the trade? No Way!
 - e. but that is precisely what *we do* when we trade in the riches of seeking Christ for the mud bricks of this world!
4. If we think about the Fall in the Garden of Eden, we realize the path every temptation and sin take.
5. Why did Eve give in and yield?
 - a. first of all, her attention to the Lord was *sidetracked* by the suggestion of the devil.
 - b. we read that Eve stopped to *consider* the temptation, *looked* at the forbidden fruit, and was *attracted* to it.
 - c. in other words, *first* she decided to *suspend faith* in what God said about the whole affair,
 - d. then she *fixed her attention* on the object of the temptation.
 - e. 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.

6. This is precisely what happens to us when we yield to sin – every single time!
7. The difference with *besetting sins* is that because of *repetition*, the first part of this process is compressed and already done in our minds.
8. We've developed a *habit* of jumping straight to the point of looking at and desiring the sin.
 - a. because we've given in so often – we've fallen into a pattern of losing sight of God in favor of the sin.
 - b. the temptation seems so close and God so distant.
 - c. even the Noontime sun can be eclipsed by my thumb if I hold it close enough to my eye.
9. The writer tells us *how* to lay aside besetting sin.
 - a. we must keep our eyes fixed on the prize!
 - b. 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.
10. Just as the heroes of the past kept their eyes fixed on their reward, we must keep our eyes fixed on ours.
11. And that's why he says at the end of v. 1, **“let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”**
 - a. we need to have the mindset that we're in this for the long-haul.
 - b. 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.
12. 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.
13. She psyches herself up for a long run and hits the street pacing herself so that she can reach the end.
14. The Christian life is a *marathon*, not a sprint.
15. 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.
16. One thing about a long-distance runner – they know where the

end of the race is and every stride is aimed in that direction!

- a. you and I need to do that too –
 - b. 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.
 - c. don't get sidetracked.
 - 1) watch out for the potholes.
 - 2) and strip off anything that would get in the way of running unhindered.
17. And remember, even Jesus, in running His race endured opposition and hardship.
18. But He now has finished His race and awaits us in glory.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Blondin

1. Blondin was a famous tightrope walker of some time ago.
2. His claim to fame was walking over Niagara Falls on a slender rope from shore to shore.
3. He never faltered or failed; but Blondin had a secret.
4. As he made his way over the rope, he would keep his eyes fixed on a large silver star he had erected at the far end.
5. The star was the center of his attention and guided him to the other side.

B. Our Star

1. In running our race, we must look to our bright and morning Star, the Lord Jesus.
2. He's run the race ahead of us to scope out the course and make sure ours can be negotiated safely.
3. And now He bids us to run, keeping our eyes fixed on Him.
4. What we find in these verses is a reminder that the Christian Faith and Life really is all about Christ!
5. He is the Center and Circumference- or as the writer says it here – He is the Author and the Finisher of our faith.
6. As we sang in worship today – “It's all about You, Jesus! It's all about You!”