**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (40): The Book Of Better Things**

**“Running The Race of Faith”**

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

**March 23, 2025**

There are a number of unanswered questions about the letter to the Hebrews. For example, who were the Hebrews? Other than being Jewish Christians, we don’t know. Where did they live? We don’t know. Who wrote this letter? Some say Apollos, others say Barnabas, but in the words of an early Church father, “as to who actually wrote the epistle, God only knows” (Origen). When was the letter was written? Our author writes as if the Jerusalem temple was still standing before its destruction in AD 70. But in the absence of any clear evidence for the identity of the readers or the author, we really don’t know when this letter was written.

However, one thing we *do* know: These Hebrew Christians had grown weary. They were spiritually exhausted. When they first came to faith, they were “fired up” for Christ. But over time, those flames began to flicker and grow dim. The pressures and persecution that came with being a Christian were proving to be too much.

In Hebrews 10:32-34, our author has reminded them of those “earlier days,” when they had suffered for their faith so valiantly: “*Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions*.”

But the persecution and suffering had continued, and some were ready to give up. All through this letter there are indications that these readers had slowed down and slacked off. They were on the verge of “drifting” away from their moorings in Christ. What’s worse, they had become “dull of hearing,” or “slow to learn.” By this time, they ought to have been “teachers;” but they still needed others to teach them the A – B – Cs of God’s Word all over again.

**Q.** So, what does our author do at this point in his letter? **A.** After reminding them of the absolute necessity to endure (10:36-38) and providing them with numerous examples of those who *had* endured (11:4-38), he issues his well-known exhortation: “*. . . let us run with endurance the race that is marked out for us*” (12:1). As we shall see, it’s one of the many athletic metaphors the New Testament authors use to describe the Christian life.

Although it isn’t clear from our English translations, that exhortation is the *one central commandment* nestled within the verses before us today (12:1-2). It is found at the *very end* of verse one: “. . . *let us run with endurance. . .*” Everything else in this passage gives us the *reason* for doing so or provides us with instruction on how this is to be done. Our starting point, then, is with the exhortation at the end of verse one.

**A. The Exhortation to Run (v. 1d):** “*Let us run with endurance the race that is marked out for us*.” The word that is translated “race” is the word from which we get our word “agonize.” It implies the strenuous effort and struggle that is often associated with an athletic contest. For example, when Paul looks back over thirty years of labor as an apostle and says, “*I have fought the good fight*;” the word translated “fight” is the same word translated “race.”

This also fits in well with other athletic metaphors that Paul uses to describe the nature of the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, he portrays his Christian experience as if he were both a runner and a boxer. In Ephesians 6:12, he says the reason we must put on the full armor of God is because “*We do not wrestle against flesh and blood*,” but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

This is the reason our author exhorts us to run this race “*with perseverance*.” The Christian life is not a leisurely stroll down the yellow brick road. Nor is it a wind sprint. It’s a long-distance marathon. It calls for a sustained, life-long commitment, one that is energized by the power of the Holy Spirit. Further, this race we are called to run has a goal. The path has been marked out for us, and there is a finish line. Paul speaks of it in Philippians when he says, “*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ*” (v. 14).

That prize is the blessing and reward of being with Christ in the world to come, our true home (Heb. 10:34; 11:13-16). Our author refers to this as “*the promise of God’s rest*,” (Heb. 4:1), and then says, “*Let us therefore strive to enter that rest . . .*” (4:11). As we have seen throughout our studies, the faith that saves is a persevering faith (Heb. 3:6; 12-14).

Clearly, our author knows nothing of anyone *meandering* their way through the Christian life, at times veering off to the left, and then to the right. He knows nothing of the comfortable Christianity that we see today, sometimes referred to as “coasting Christianity.” He refuses to acknowledge any sort of so-called Christianity that is not likened to running a race or fighting a fight. The Christian life is “both vigorous and rigorous” (Sam Storms). We are living in a war zone and our enemy, the devil (Cf. 2:14-15), never takes a day off. Neither should we!

**B. The Motivation to Run (v. 1a):** “*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with endurance . . ..*” That great cloud of witnesses, of course, refers to the men and women of faith who were just surveyed in the previous chapter (Abel-Enoch-Noah-Abraham and Sarah-Isaac-Jacob-Joseph-Moses-Rahab-Gideon-Barak-Jephthah-Samson-David-Samuel-Elijah-Elisha-Jeremiah-Daniel-and so many more.) But in what sense are they “witnesses?” The word can mean one of two things.

First, it can refer to someone who observes or watches. Given this meaning, those Old Testament saints would be spectators, much like a great crowd seated in the grandstands of a large arena. They would be cheering us on as we run our race of faith. That’s possible, of course. I suppose we might be encouraged to pick up our pace if we knew that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were rooting for us. But it’s highly unlikely this is what our author had in mind, which takes us to the second meaning of the word.

The word “witness” may also refer to someone who *testifies*; that is, someone who “bears witness” to something he 0r she has seen or done. That is certainly true of these Old Testament saints. Their loyalty and endurance bear witness to the faithfulness of God. They testify that His promises are true, and that He will sustain us to the end. Thus, it’s not so much what they see in us that matters, but what we see in them! When we look to them, we can be encouraged and strengthened and reminded of what can be accomplished when *we* exercise *our* faith in the promises of God. What He has enabled them to do – He can enable us to do as well. “*Therefore . . . let us run with endurance the race marked out for us*!”

**C. The Instruction on How to Run:** Should anyone ask, “How should we run?” Our author gives us three answers: **(1)** by keeping our weight down; **(2)** by keeping our limbs free; **(3)** by keeping our heads up.

**1. Keep the Weight Down (v. 1b):** “*throw off everything that hinders . . .*” (NIV), or “*lay aside every encumbrance*” (NASB), or “*lay aside every weight*” (ESV). When an athlete competes in the Olympic Games, he or she strips down to the bare minimum. No one runs in their workout sweatsuits or heavy wristbands, and no one is overweight. The same is true for a baseball batter. He will stand in the on-deck circle, swinging his bat with the “donut” that he’s placed on the bat. That’s the weighted ring that he will remove before he steps to home plate and tries to get a hit. Once removed, it’s designed to make the bat feel lighter. No batter ever comes to the plate with a weighted bat. He’s laid aside the weight that will hinder his swing – especially if he’s facing a pitcher throwing a fast ball at 99 miles per hour.

In the same way, we are told that we must shed *everything* that might weigh us down – if we want to press on faithfully in the Christian life. What does that mean? Our author is talking about *anything* that has the tendency to dull our spiritual senses or slow us down on our spiritual journey. A weight, therefore, is not necessarily something that is sinful or bad. The question is not “what’s wrong with what I may be doing?”; but rather, “Does it help me run the race I’m called to run?”

For some, a “weight” may be too much TV, or too much time on the internet and social media; or too much time on the phone; or too much time devoted to hobbies, or to entertainment, or to the stock market, or to home improvements; or spending too much time with people who wear us down instead of building us up. The list probably differs from person to person; but the principle is the same. Keep the weight down. Travel light. Don’t let anything impede your progress in the Christian life.

**2. Keep the Limbs Free (v. 1c):** “*throw off every weight and the sin that so easily entangles us*.” Any runner will tell you that it’s easy to get tripped up and go down at the first turn on the track. In the days before “staggered starts,” everyone lined up on the starting line. When the gun went off, everyone raced to get to the inside lane. That’s when runners would get entangled with other runners, and one would go down.

In the same way, says our author, we must steer clear of sin, which so easily trips us up. That’s true for any and every sin, of course, but I’m inclined to believe that when our author speaks of “the sin,” he’s referring to “the sin of unbelief.” It was unbelief that kept the first generation of Israelites out of the Promised Land (Heb. 3:7-4:13), and it is unbelief that hinders us from running the race that is set before us. Trusting in the provisions and promises of God is what fuels us for persevering in the faith, or running the race marked out for us!

**3. Keep the Head Up (v. 2): “.** . . *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*.” Any competitor knows he must keep his eyes fixed on the goal toward which he is running. He cannot be looking back, at who may be catching up to him. Nor can he be looking to the right or to the left, at who may be passing him. His head is up and his gaze is fixed at what lies before him.

In the same way, says our author, persevering in the Christian life requires “*fixing our eyes on Jesus*.” It means riveting our attention on Him and fixing our focus on Him – without allowing the slightest distraction. *So, how do we do this?* By learning more about Him through His Word. By *spending time* with Him in prayer. By remaining open to His leading. By seeking to follow His example; and by clinging to Him and treasuring Him more than anyone else!

*Why should we do this?* Our author tells us – it’s because Jesus is “*the pioneer and perfector of our faith*” (NIV). As the “pioneer” of faith, He is the trailblazer who has gone before us. He is the perfect guide for us to follow as we travel along the path that has been marked out for us. As the “perfector” of faith, He is the One in whom faith has reached its perfection. In the words of F. F. Bruce, “The whole life of Jesus was characterized by unbroken and unquestioning faith in His Heavenly Father, and never more so than when in Gethsemane. He committed Himself to His Father’s hands for the ordeal of the cross with the words: ‘Not what I will, but what Thou wilt’ (Mark 14:36).” Had He not done so, our author never could have hailed Him as the “perfector of faith” and the “perfect” example for us to follow.

Instead, He “*endured the cross, scorning its shame*.” How in the world, we might ask, could He have done this? How could He have disregarded the intense shame and pain of being nailed to a cross and dying such an unimaginably horrific, agonizing death? The answer is that He had set His sights on the “joy” that awaited Him on the other side of the cross, after the resurrection. And what was that joy? It was the joy of the restored “glory” He had with the Father before the foundation of the world (Cf. John 17:1-5). It was the joy of being seated “*at the right hand of the throne of God*,” as our author says in this verse. It was the joy of “*bringing many sons to glory*” (Heb. 2:10). What does that mean for us? It means that if we are numbered among the sheep for whom Christ died (John 10:11-16; 27-29), then His “joy” was the joy of entering into an eternal fellowship with the Father – and with you and me!

That is what Jesus did. He endured – and so should we. The joy of being with Christ in the world to come is what should cause us to *keep on running* – despite the suffering and adversity that we face in this present world. There is joy – unspeakable joy – that is set before *us*. So, let’s invest our hope in that joy. Let’s continue to run so that we lay hold of that joy. *Why?* Because others have gone before us and tell us: “By faith we finished the race, and you can too!” *How shall we do this?* By keeping our weight down, and our limbs free, and our heads up, focused on what lies ahead!