

# THE RACE

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

For those of us who do not care for running it probably seems fitting that the Greek term for a foot *race* is *agon* from which we derive the term agony. We have a number of marathoners in our church family: Traci Adams, Jonathon Burchmore, Leo Dufresne, David Gettis, DeeJ Goodno. They know all about the agony of the race. They are a different breed of human being; much to be admired.

In Hebrews 12 the Preacher likens the life of faith to running a race which I'm sure our marathoners would agree is an apt comparison. Both take discipline, both require endurance of pain and fatigue, both have experiences of intense joy and satisfaction and both are run in hope of reaching the finish line.

Some of those to whom the Preacher wrote were tempted to drop out of the race and return to Judaism. The Preacher's purpose was to strengthen and encourage these Hebrew Christians to continue to run the race with endurance because *those who endure inherit the promises of God*.

In the previous section of 10:19-39, the Preacher exhorted his readers to draw near, hold firm and stir one another up to love and good works in light of the ministry of Christ, our High Priest (10:19-25). He warned them to not return to Judaism lest they die in the judgment coming upon that generation (10:26-31; cf. Luke 21:20-24). He encouraged them to continue enduring in faith (10:32-39).

The Preacher then recounted the faith of Old Testament saints as models to imitate. His emphasis is that faith pleases God (11:6).

God declares us righteous (*commends us*) on the basis of faith, not works (11:2, 39). The majority of faith examples in Hebrews 11 pre-date the Law of Moses. This seems intentional. The Preacher is stressing that faith, not the Law, is the basis of salvation. The heroes of Hebrews 11 were commended for their faith not for keeping of the Law of Moses.

In addition to believing core truths revealed in God's Word, every believer must trust God in the midst of their unique life circumstances. Every believer in every dispensation has had their own unique *race* of faith to run.

Consider the *race* set before the Exodus Generation.

**Hebrews 11:29 (ESV)**

**<sup>29</sup> By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.**

The Wilderness Generation faced a different *race*.

**Hebrews 11:30 (ESV)**

**<sup>30</sup> By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.**

Inside the walls of Jericho another *race* was run by Rahab.

Hebrews 11:31 (ESV)

<sup>31</sup> By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

Different circumstances, different cultures, different experiences but each *race* required faith. Each person had to trust the revelation God gave them.

Think about the amazing *races* run by believers up to the coming of Christ.

Hebrews 11:32–38 (ESV)

<sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—<sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,<sup>34</sup> quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.<sup>35</sup> Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.<sup>36</sup> Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.<sup>37</sup> They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—<sup>38</sup> of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

Lions, fire, sword, resurrection, chains, caves; each judge, king and prophet had a unique *race* to run by faith. Their faith, expressed in the midst of their life circumstances, pleased God and secured for them the promises that will be fulfilled in the future.

Hebrews 11:39–40 (ESV)

<sup>39</sup> And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,<sup>40</sup> since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

What the Preacher means in verse 40 is explained by Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum:

*Why did God allow the Old Testament saints to die before His promises were fulfilled? According to verse 40, the answer is that there is a unity in God's program: "God having provided some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect". If God had fulfilled all the Messianic Kingdom promises to the Old Testament saints in their lifetime, then there would be nothing for present believers to anticipate. Since the Messianic Kingdom promises have not yet been fulfilled, both Old Testament and New Testament believers can anticipate the same thing: the Messianic Kingdom. There is something waiting for all believers in the future. When the author states that "apart from us they should not be made perfect", he means that Old Testament and New Testament saints should eventually reach their perfection together. Eventually, all will receive their ultimate sanctification (ultimate glorification) together at the Second Coming of*

*Jesus. By then all the faithful will be resurrected since all believers are part of the First Resurrection.*<sup>1</sup>

These Old Testament saints are models of faith to be imitated (6:12). They ran their *race* with patient endurance. Like them, we each have our own unique *race* to run by faith with patient endurance.

Hebrews 12:1–2 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

The image here is of a stadium. The Old Testament saints aren't in the stands, they're on the in-field having finished their *race*. They're right there next to the track cheering us on. We aren't running our race in boots carrying a backpack! We're as light as we can get. And we run with our heads up focused on the lead runner.

The command is to *run with endurance the race that is set before us*. The Christian life is a race to be run. There is a common body of truth we all must believe for salvation. But your race of faith is also unique to you; to your circumstances and personality. The things that tempt you and pull you away from Christ are different than the things that tempt me and pull me away from Christ. Whatever things those are, those are the weights we need to lay aside.

There are two things we need to do to run our race. The first is to *lay aside every weight, and (the) sin which clings so closely*. The *weight* can be anything that distracts our focus on Christ or diverts our energy from serving Him. In the case of the Hebrew Christians, *the sin* (Greek text), they needed to lay aside was the sin of apostasy; of returning to Judaism. This is not the sin most of us need to lay aside, but it is interesting that for most of us there is a particular sin with which we struggle. It is that sin *which clings so closely* that we need to lay aside. It takes prayer, discipline, reliance upon the Holy Spirit, setting up new habits, recruiting the prayer support and help of Christian brothers and sisters.

The second thing we must do is continue *looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith*. Just as He endured and received the promises so also, if we endure, we too will receive the promises. What was it that enabled Jesus to endure the cross? Warren Wiersbe shares this insight:

*Please keep in mind that, during His ministry on earth, our Lord did not use His divine powers for His own personal needs. Satan tempted Him to do this (Matt. 4:1–4), but Jesus refused. It was our Lord's faith that enabled Him to endure. He kept the eye of faith on "the joy that was set before Him." From Psalm 16:8–10, He knew that He would come out of the tomb alive.... In that psalm (16:11) David speaks about "fullness of joy" in the presence of the Father. Also, from Psalm 110:1, 4, Jesus knew that He would be exalted to heaven in glory.... So "the joy*

<sup>1</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles: Hebrews, James, First Peter, Second Peter, Jude*, 1st ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2005), 167–168.

*that was set before Him” would include Jesus’ completing the Father’s will, His resurrection and exaltation, and His joy in presenting believers to the Father in glory (Jude 24).<sup>2</sup>*

Throughout the book of Hebrews, the Preacher emphasizes the importance of the *future* hope. The Hebrew Christians were prone to look back and want to go back to Judaism, but they need to keep looking ahead to the joy set before them, the joy of life in the Millennial Kingdom and beyond.

That same joy lies before us; we’re running for the same finish line. We each have our own unique race to run. There are trials and difficulties along the way but like the saints who have gone before us we need to persevere in faith. We need to keep our eyes on Jesus the ultimate example of faith and endurance. Just as He received the promises because of His faith and endurance so also we will receive the promises if we endure. So let us run the race before us by faith with patient endurance.

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<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 323.