

The Race of Faith – Hebrews 12:1-2

INTRODUCTION

A. Many people feel that they are in a personal rat race. Well, true believers in Christ **are** in real spiritual race.

B. The writer of Hebrews wants to encourage believers in their lives to live by faith – by recalling Old Testament examples of faith, by running the race wisely, and by focusing on Jesus.

I. The examples of faith (vs. 1a) – A new Bible chapter starts with Hebrew 12:1-2 – but the first word (“Wherefore”) shows it actually concludes chapter 11 with its many examples of faith. There is no idea of “seeing” here (as found in some translations); the author simply reminds his audience of a great crowd whose lives are a witness of their faith.

A. Qualification (“witnesses” – cf. 11:39) A witness sees or hears something; at times, though, a witness also tells what he or she has seen or heard (i.e., “bears witness”). That was the task Jesus gave His Apostles (Acts 1:8) – and thus was a requirement when the 11 apostles had to choose a 12th Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:22 – “to be a witness with us of His resurrection” – not having witnessed the actual resurrection event but having seen the risen Lord). Thus, not all believers could be witnesses. The Greek word *martus* (“witness”) is used in the New Testament in both ways – those that just witness something and those that tell about it. Which type of witnesses are these in Hebrew 12:1?

1. Not witnesses OF us – Many pastors and other Christian leaders have – intentionally or not – scared believers into thinking that believers who have died (including family members) are watching what believers on the earth are doing. They cite this passage as proof. Among them, regrettably, is an otherwise usually trustworthy Bible teacher and author – namely William R. Newell – who wrote that “it is the heavenly amphitheater from which those who have gone before, **the so great cloud of witnesses**, are viewed as looking upon the race that you and I are running, down in the arena right now!” (*Hebrews Verse by Verse*, publ. 1947, p. 400) I personally think this idea is farfetched. A quick reading of just this one verse in English (especially the word “cloud”) **could** lead to this idea, but it ignores the context.

a. The record of this idea

1) Context of the whole Bible – No place in Scripture even hints that saints in glory are observing saints on earth.

2) Context here

a) The word “Wherefore” clearly refers readers back to chapter 11 – where there is no hint of dead saints watching living saints. Instead, there’s a recounting of what Old Testament saints did; they lived (and died) by faith. That’s all. Their lives were to be seen as witnesses (evidence) of lives that pleased God (Heb 11:6) – because they lived by faith.

b) The Greek verb for “compassed about” (*perikeimai*) – *peri* (“about”) and *kaimai* (“lie” or “be laid or set”) – pictures not flying or floating in the heavens but rather lying down on the earth (e.g., used of Jesus lying in a manger [Lk 2:12,16] and in a sepulchre [Mt 28:6; Lk 23:53; 24:12; Jn 20:5,6,7,12]).

b. The reaction to this idea

1) Admittedly, the whole idea of dead saints watching what’s taking place on earth could make some believers on earth feel a little uneasy; it might even bring about a change in behavior for the better.

2) However, wouldn’t it also destroy some of the joy of heaven, causing saints in glory (at times at least) sorrow, dismay, regret, and maybe even anger (righteous indignation) as they view events on earth?

2. But witnesses TO us (cf. Ac 22:20; Rev 2:13) – They testify to us by their lives.

a. Giving evidence – The individuals cited in Hebrews 11 all gave evidence of living by faith.

b. Giving existence – Some even gave up their lives because of their faith. They were martyrs (11:36-38 – the English word coming from the Greek word [*martus*] for “witness”).

B. Quantification (“so great”) – There were many, and many more could have been mentioned (11:32).

1. The appearance of the group (“compassed about with ... a cloud”) – The verbal picture is that of being enveloped in or surrounded by a cloud (cf. Heb 5:2 “compassed with infirmity”).

2. The abundance of the group (“so great”) – The Greek word *tosoutos* is used to indicate a great entity (amount or group or worth – e.g., “so many miracles” in Jn 12:37 and Jesus being “so much better than the angels” in Heb 1:4) or great extent of time (e.g., “many years” in Lk 15:29 and “so long a time” in Heb 4:7). It is not just a handful (or insignificant number) of people cited as examples of faith in Hebrews 11; it’s a large group that must not be ignored.

II. The exercise of faith (vs. 1b)

A. The recipients – Before looking at the specific ingredients in this exhortation to run (to exercise faith), it may be helpful to understand correctly to whom this exhortation was addressed (its recipients).

1. The possibility of unbelievers – A few recent pastors and TV preachers/personalities have claimed

that Hebrews was written (at least partially) to unbelievers. John MacArthur (following John Owen and Arthur W. Pink), for example, says this about “let us”: “The reference is to those Hebrews who had made a profession of Christ, but had not gone all the way to full faith. They had not yet begun the race, which starts with salvation. The writer has invited them to accept salvation in Christ and join the race.” (*The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, publ. 2005, p. 1873)

2. The reality of believers – MacArthur’s view ignores the fact that Hebrews 11 describes the behaving of Old Testament believers, not their becoming believers. In Hebrews 12:1 the writer uses personal pronouns (e.g., “us”) and first-person-plural verbs (including himself with other believers) to exhort / encourage believers to run (live) by faith – as did OT saints, who had only a limited written revelation of God and truth. The form of the Greek verb here for “run” (present tense) shows the exhortation is not to commence the race but rather to continue it (“let’s keep running”).

Just briefly perusing through Hebrews we find a number of indications that the recipients were truly believers – things that could hardly be written to or about the unsaved. For example, the writer says that by the time he was writing they should be able to be teachers – but that they still needed to be taught basic doctrine (5:12). The Hebrews had financially helped fellow believers (“saints”) and were still doing it (6:10). The recipients were God’s sons (12:5). Then, in the last chapter the writer asks the recipients to “Pray for us” (13:18), and he concludes by asking God – not to save his readers – but to make them “perfect in every good work to do His will” (13:21). These passages and others in Hebrews point definitely to the recipients as being already saved (already in the race) – not to unsaved unbelievers.

B. The race – Some division of opinion has also occurred over the nature of the race. What race is it?

1. The number of races – Notice that the believers are exhorted rather than commanded to run – another evidence that we are under grace, not law. The racers are believers (“let us”), but are they in different races or one race?

(a) A different race for each believer – Some have suggested that the author of Hebrews refers here to more than one race – a different race for each believer to run (i.e., a different individual life to live).

Truly, God planned for the Body of Christ to be made up of different types of individuals with different attributes and abilities – to travel different avenues of life. He saves these differing individuals and equips them to function in different ways as members of the Church. 1 Corinthians 12 emphasizes these truths – that all true believers are members of the Body of Christ – but they have different gifts and functions (foot, hand, ear, eye). We’re not all created equal.

(b) The same race for all believers – More likely, it seems, is that what is in focus in Hebrews 12:1 is the one race (the Christian life) that every believer is expected to live – a life of faith. The author did not say “the races (plural) set before us” or anything similar to the idea of “the particular race that each one of us is expected to run.”

2. The nature of the race – Worthy of note are the various ways this Greek word (*agōn*) here rendered “race” is translated the New Testament – “conflict” twice, “fight” twice, “contention” once, and “race” once. From the three other renderings one could almost get the impression that “race” is not the correct meaning here in Hebrew 12:1.

Yet, the verb “run” (*trechō* – cf. English “trek”) is properly rendered “run” 19 out of 20 times it’s used in the New Testament. It’s used for running or walking or moving swiftly – thus, can imply the idea of a sprint. So it seems that a race is the intention here, though it may have the added dimension of a fight (a conflict) as well as a contest. Thus, the Christian life involves swift movement (active running) – though elsewhere the ideas of standing or walking are used.

C. The requirements – Two accompaniments or requirements are mentioned as important (if not requisite) to successfully running the race – placing aside and persistence,

1. Placing aside – In the Greek “laying aside” is not a command (an imperative) but a condition (a past participle – “having laid aside”). It is something one should do before a race. We must part with (or lay aside) two categories of things. a. What’s extra (“every weight” – the only place the Greek *ogkos* [“weight”] is found in the NT). The author does not elaborate, but presumably he has in mind extra clothing (or maybe even extra body weight). It is true that runners do not usually run in a shirt, tie, coat, hat, or even long slacks – and most are far from obese.

b. What’s evil (“sin” – “The” is not in most manuscripts, so “sin” may not refer to just one sin.)

1) It’s sinful – it’s the common Greek word for missing the mark (*hamartia*).

2) It’s singular – Some have suggested that this is the idea of a particular sin (or sins) in each believer’s life. Others think it refers to a sin common to all the Hebrews – perhaps disbelief, perhaps doubt or discouragement leading to giving up on living for Christ.

3) It’s surrounding (*euperistatos* – “easily encircles / ambushes / entangles”)

2. Persisting in (“with patience”) – It’s not the idea of calmly waiting for or tolerating something (“patience”). Instead, it indicates perseverance or persistence. The Hebrews needed endurance (as the writer said in 10:36). Believers today likewise need to be determined to keep on going (to persist) – not slacking or stopping – to live each day and all of life by faith till our earthly “race” ends.

III. The epitome of faith – Remembering the faith of Old Testament saints should encourage believers in their lives, but the supreme direction of believers' thoughts in this age of grace should be toward Jesus – not to former or current believers. In fact, the verb here (*aphoraō*) has the idea of turning the eyes from other things to fix them on something or someone different. So the writer of Hebrews 12:2 turns the attention of his readers to Jesus.

A. Who He is = our great Example

1. In relation to assurance or dependence (“faith”) – Jesus is the “author and finisher of our faith.” In fact, “Jesus” is in the emphatic position in the Greek sentence: “the of the faith author and finisher, Jesus.”

a. The general meaning of the words – The Greek word for “author” (*archēgos*) does not mean author or writer of something. It refers rather to a leader, pioneer, head, prince, or captain. Jesus is called the “prince of life” (Ac 3:15) and prince and Savior (Ac 5:31) as well as captain of salvation (Heb 2:10). The Greek word for “finisher” (*teleiōtēs*) occurs only here, comes from the verb *teleiōō*, and indicates completer, perfecter, or fulfiller. Thus, John Nelson Darby correctly renders this phrase in his translation of Hebrews 12:2 “the leader and completer of faith.”

b. The meaning in this passage – This is **not** referring to the Jesus' faith (any supposed faith He had or exercised) but rather to the faith into which and in which He leads believers – the faith that saves us, “the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). His starting of that faith in our lives caused us to trust Him for salvation, and He will continue to perfect that faith as we live our lives (Php 1:6). As God views things, “by one offering” (that is, through Jesus' death) He hath perfected forever the sanctified” (Heb 10:14). So, in one sense of the term, God has already “sanctified” us by setting us apart (the central meaning of sanctification) in choosing to save us – AND He also sees us through Christ as already perfect – though the process of progressive sanctification from sin is still taking place, and we won't be sinless till we see Christ in glory. This way of expressing these truths is similar to that in Romans 8:29-30, where Paul writes that “whom He justified, them He also glorified” (as if our future glorification is so definite that God sees it as a past event).

2. In relation to atonement or deliverance (“endured the cross, despising the shame”) – The writer refers appropriately to the central event in history – Jesus' death – not to His birth or even His resurrection. The writer does not just say that Jesus was hung on a cross or that He died. No Jesus “endured” the cross (the Greek verb related to the noun for “patience” [persistence] in verse 1).

B. What He did = the great exchange

1. Glory (“for the joy that was set before Him”) – The Greek word for “for” is *anti* (meaning “against,” “as opposed to,” “instead of,” “in the place of”). This brings to mind Paul's description of Jesus' giving up His position of equality that He had with His Father in heaven in order to come to earth to endure the cross (Php 2:6).

(a) Not future – It does **not** refer to something future (something He would gain after His death). This futuristic view is held by John MacArthur, who says “Jesus persevered so that He might receive the joy of accomplishment of the Father's will and exaltation.” (*The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, publ. 2005, p. 1873)

(b) But present in the past – However, before the Incarnation, Jesus did **not** look ahead to some future joy as a reward for dying on the cross. Hebrews 12:2 says He was willing to **give up** the joy He already had right in front of Him in heaven in exchange for the cross – not that He would **get** after Calvary what He didn't then already have! The participle “set before” indicates something or someone placed in front of (or before the face of) someone in the present – not some object or event in the distant future. It is the same Greek word used in verse 1 of the race that is set before believers (not some future race but a present race, the race we're already in). Note the present/past meaning of the Greek preposition *anti* as seen in its use elsewhere: “Archelaus did reign in Judaea **in the room of** his father Herod” (Mt 2:22), “An eye **for** an eye, and a tooth **for** a tooth” (Mt 5:38), “Recompense to no man evil **for** evil” (Rom 12:17), “See that none render evil **for** evil” (1Th 5:15), “not rendering evil **for** evil, or railing **for** railing” (1Pt 3:9).

2. Calvary (“endured the cross, despising the shame”)

a. He passed away (crucifixion) – leaving the “**joy set before Him**” (glory) in order to experience the cross (Calvary)

1) Jesus suffered (“endured the cross” – and endured hostility [verse 3]).

2) Jesus scorned (“despising the shame” of the cross). Shame could not deter Him.

b. He passed above (ascension) – “is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” More accurately, “sat down” (past tense – aorist active tense, not present passive tense) – Jesus' return to glory.

CONCLUSIONS

A. The people – All humans are either in the race for all believers (saved) or not in the race (unsaved).

B. The race – Hebrew 12:1-2 exhorts believers **to continue** to properly run this race, **not to commence** the race.

C. The witnesses – OT saints are **witnessing to us** by their lives of faith – **not watching us** living on earth.

D. The faith – The faith is what **Jesus gives** us to be saved and to live – not any alleged faith He lived.

E. The Cross – The supreme incentive to live by faith in Christ is His atoning sacrifice at Calvary for our sin.