

---

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## Considering Christ Hebrews 12:1-3 (Part 1)

**1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

When I was young and lived in Seal Beach, California, my parents rightfully saw fit to make sure I knew how to swim. For several summers, I took swimming lessons at the school right across the street from my house. During the summer of my ninth year of life, I had progressed well in my swimming abilities and was able to take a course that would earn the title, “Jr. Lifeguard” for all who could complete it. After several weeks of instruction came the final week of testing, where we were asked to perform all kinds of swimming and life saving procedures. I remember one such test in particular that caused me a bit of anxiety. We had to run and jump into the pool wearing shoes, socks, blue jeans, a t-shirt, and a sweatshirt. We were also to be wearing our swimsuit underneath. Once in the water, we were to quickly take off our clothes, down to our swimsuit and then swim over to another part of the pool where another student was floating, get a hold of them using the proper techniques and then swim back to the other end of the pool while rescuing this student.

For good or for bad, I was not in the first group but I got to sit back and watch the several of the students perform this practice heroism. Most of them succeeded (for by this time any underachievers had already left the class), but there were a couple of failed. I can remember thinking to myself, “Can I do this? Can I do this?” Now, there were several things that motivated me to get into the water and compete in this test. Of course there was the glory and honor of being know as a “Jr. Lifeguard” – a title that not everyone had. You also would receive a certificate and, of great value, a pin that said, “Jr. Lifeguard.” These were all important to me, but in the end, I don’t think it was these things that motivated and encouraged me to jump into the water. What did this was having been able to watch several of my classmates jump into the water before me and successfully complete the exercise. In other words, I had their encouragement and example by which I could joyfully conclude (not so much in these words since I was only nine, but at least in attitude), “If I do even as those who have gone before me, then I most certainly will succeed.” Or, in nine-year old vernacular, “I can do this!”

As we come to Hebrews 12, let us remember that chapter numbers are man-made breaks, as the author is still speaking to his readers about faith, but now he is making it a personal matter. He has just concluded his list of the faithful, giving example after example of what faith looks like and now begins this call to his readers to so practice faith. And to a certain degree, the call here to **“run the race”** of faith has been preceded by those who have succeeded, who finished their races “by faith” and from this, both the original readers as well as us are to concluded, “If I do even as these who have gone before me by faith, then I most

---

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

certainly will succeed in the purpose or goal of faith, which is a bit more than a Jr. Lifeguard pin, but rather is a life approved by and pleasing to God.

Hebrews 12:1-3 is nothing short then of an exhortation to know and live for Christ “by faith” – something that our author calls a “**race**.” And just how are we to run this race? Well, there are seven practices by which we are to compete and complete this life of faith; and these seven practices are in two groups. The first group, found in verse 1, calls us to examine ourselves and includes four practices. These we will consider this morning. The second group, found in verses 2-3, calls us to examine Christ. These we will consider in two weeks. So, let us begin with this first group of practices where we examine ourselves. If you are to compete and complete the race of faith you must...

## 1. Have **encouragement** to run

*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us...(11:1a)*

Our God is a God of generous blessing and help and He knows our weaknesses, our fears and our needs. And while the life of faith, of this firm trust in the person, promises and provisions of God is not to be lived by looking first and primarily to others but rather by the example and expectation of Christ according to His Word, God has given us the gift – the great gift of seeing faith successfully lived out in the lives of others. It is by these examples of faith as we have seen in Hebrews 11 that we have an encouragement or motivation to follow fully after Jesus Christ. Let us see this in our text.

We begin with “**therefore**” – a word that we have considered many times in the book of Hebrews and yet here is a different and unique word in the Greek. While the word does indeed call us to consider what is about to be written in light of what has been written, this word is used to emphasize the very special connection between the previous subject and the current subject. The previous subject had been the faithful of the past and the current subject the faith of those in the present. In essence 12:1 begins with the idea saying, “On the basis of what we learned about faith in the lives of the Old Testament saints, let us now find encouragement to exercise that same faith today.”

In light of the fact that “**faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**” (11:1-2); and in light of the fact that “*without faith it is impossible to please God*” (11:6); and in light of the fact “**all these...gained their approval by faith**” (Hebrews 11:39); on the basis of these things – let us be encouraged and excited to live by faith. Additionally stated here in verse 1 we read, “**since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us**” – which does not mean that all the Old Testament saints are sitting in heaven in some stadium cheering us on, but rather this refers to a great number of witnesses, or testimonies of the good results of faith as seen in the lives of the saints. Or, to say it another way, because we have so many examples of faith to draw upon and to lead us toward a life that pleases God, we may now be encouraged to continue on in Christ. We have these people’s history, filled with examples of prevailing, persevering and ultimately triumphant faith – these fill our lives as a great cloud that engulfs everything we see and by which we must now be persuaded to move on in faith, that we too might be approved by God as pleasing to Him. In other words, because faith worked in these others, I am to be encouraged that the same faith will work in me also.

Beloved, the call is to imitate that faith which was approved of God. All around us – that is “**surrounding us**” are such examples to follow. In fact, the New Testament itself is

---

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

generously sprinkled with exhortations to consider and imitate the faith of others. Let me give some examples. In 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1, Paul calls the believers to imitate him – to follow his example of faith. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, the Thessalonians are commended for being imitators of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy and in 2:14 of their imitating the “**churches**” or congregations “**of God in Christ Jesus that [were] in Judea.**” And even here in Hebrews, specifically in 13:7, believers are called to...

**Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.**

The Lord has given us a great encouragement, the examples of faith in both past and present saints. An application then is this – that each of us is to study and know how the faith of the faithful operates so that we may imitate it.

## 2. Lay aside every encumbrance

...let us also lay aside every encumbrance...(11:1b)

Before getting to the main exhortation of this passage, we read next here in verse one next of the first of two necessities in order to rightly live by faith. We read, “**let us also**” – meaning, “*let us like those who have gone before us...*” and then we read “**lay aside every encumbrance...**” To “**lay aside**” has the literal idea of taking off clothing. Paul uses this word in Colossians 3:8-9 to speak of putting aside things like anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech saying that such things have disappeared as we have “**laid aside the old self with its evil practices.**” In the context of a race, which is the imagery used in the context of our passage, the runner is to take off or strip himself naked of anything that will slow him down. An “**encumbrance**” is not necessarily a sin. The word simply means “a weight that hinders.” It is not wrong for a person to wear a bulky and heavy coat, but if that person is a runner about to run a race, it would do him well to rid himself of it. And do it is for the life of faith. An encumbrance can be anything, that may otherwise be good, that weighs you down spiritually. As one commentary put it,

*The Christian runner must rid himself even of innocent things which might retard him. And all that does not help, hinders. It is by running he learns what these things are. So long as he stands, he does not feel that they are burdensome and hampering.*

Beloved, even to know what your encumbrances are you must be running, actively pursuing a life of faith. And let us note that what is an encumbrance or spiritual hindrance to one person may not be to another. One person may receive an award or honor and be unaffected by it whereas another takes that award and turns it into an idol. One person may have a habit or hobby that is well managed whereas another person wants to invest all their time into it at the expense of their walk with God. And the point is, if there is anything, regardless of how good it may be, that drags you down spiritually – it may be a job, it may be a relationship, it may be an entertainment, you must strip it away. It is amazing to me that male Olympic swimmers will shave every hair off their body so as to be streamline and efficient in their race. Some of us need to do some shaving so that we might live greater lives of faith.

---

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Now, I would like to make another point of application. I have heard it said by more than one believer that there are certain weakness in every child of God that just cannot be overcome because it is simply the way God created them and therefore it is impossible to change. One believing friend of mine used this as an excuse for his often domineering and belittling attitude toward others. Beloved, we are to strive to remove such encumbrances and sins and not blame God for them. John Piper rightly noted, *“It is an assault on God if you read Hebrews 12:1 and go away saying: ‘It can’t happen. Hindrances can’t be removed. Sins can’t be laid aside.’* Such an attitude is to say that God has spoken here for nothing, that it is an empty command based upon empty promises. And yet the entire book of Hebrews, all of its teaching and theology, has been building to this point, that by faith in the superiority of Christ, even encumbrances and sins can be and must be laid aside.

How can we know what is an encumbrance that needs to be laid aside? We need to be careful here for as we noted an encumbrance does not have to be a sinful thing in itself. It is always a sin to lie. But is watching TV, or listening to music, or the hobby of stamp collecting a sin? Again, I call you to be careful, for just because you think you are intentionally sinning by such things doesn’t make it right. Too often we are in danger of becoming smug and self-righteous, justifying our actions by saying, “There’s nothing wrong with the things I do” rather than asking the right questions like, “Does this thing hinder me at all or in any way in my competing and completing the race of faith?” “Has this thing so weighed me down in the use of my time, my money or my life that I have little or no genuine Christian testimony?” Let us learn to lay aside every encumbrance.

### 3. Lay aside the entanglement of sin

...[let us also lay aside] the sin which so easily entangles us...(11:1c)

In addition to laying aside any thing that may slow us down in the race, we must also be willing to lay aside **“the sin which so easily entangles us...”** We must lay aside, take off, the entanglement of sin. There are two key words to consider here. First we consider “sin” – our text say “the sin” which has lead some to think that we are to lay aside a specific sin, or as the KJV suggests, a besetting sin – and certainly we ought to identify and strip ourselves of those sins we know to be our weakness, those areas of our lives where we miss the mark of God. But I think we are being told something about sin in general, something about the character of all sin, for second in our consideration is that sin is identified as that “which so easily entangles us...” The word **“entangles”** speaks of “thwarting a runner.” The picture that comes to my mind is that of a defensive player on a football team wrapping around the arms or legs of the running back in order to tackle him. This is how we are to picture sin, as that which wraps us up and trips us.

Now, I would suggest to you that if we pictured sin as a tackler and our selves as running backs with the ball, we would do our best to avoid, or cast off that tackler so that we might make it to the endzone. The problem is, we don’t always have such view of sin. For the running back does not play with the tackler – he does not see how close he can get to the tackler; rather his goal is to stay as far away from the tackler as possible. And if he does find himself getting wrapped up by the tackler, he will do all he can to him shake off. This is what the Christian is to do with sin, any sin – to take whatever action necessary to deal with sin. And one of the first actions we must take against sin is to identify it for what it is – sin is missing God’s holy mark, His intention for your life. Sin is to be hated; we examine our lives and find

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

all sin repulsive so that rather than running to it, we are running to God. The puritan Thomas Manton said, “My business is not to pleasure the flesh, but to please the Lord.” That little statement is a profound way of saying, “I want to lay aside the sin which seeks to trip me up.”

## 4. Run with endurance

...and let us run with endurance the race that set before us...(11:1d)

Coming to the end of verse one we find the fourth practice by which we compete and complete this life of faith, namely that we must run with endurance. We read, **“and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”** Here we find the main verb of this passage and therefore the main thrust of this passage. The Christian life is a **“race”** – literally an “agon” in the Greek, from which we get our English word “agony” – sometime translated as “struggle.” We are in a race or struggle. Too often, when people think about the Christian life, it is thought of as passive, casual, entertaining or optional. But the Christian life is identified here as a struggle, meaning that oftentimes the course will be difficult.

Notice then that we are called to **“run”** this race – we are not to walk, we are not to be passively sitting on the sidelines – we are called to run. We are not to be waiting for some easier course to be trod upon at some more convenient time. Now it the time to “run” – to strive ahead in this struggle by faith. Let us not be complaining about the condition of the course and let us not find ourselves out of shape spiritually speaking. If you are a believer, you are running.

And you are to run that **“race that is set before us.”** The idea here is that there is a course set out by God for each of us. We know that not each of us runs the same course. I am running the course of a preacher. Each of you is to run the course God has before you. Some of us may encounter greater difficulties than others on our course, but regardless of your course, each one is to run it by faith, knowing that it ultimately leads us to Christ. And may our desire be to say as did the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith...”**

Now, before we consider exactly how we are to run this race, let me point out the gospel message here. The author of Hebrews is writing to a congregation of people who are made up of both believers and unbelievers. He is reminding believers to continue in the race, but he is also calling unbelievers that they need to get into the race. If you are an unbeliever, you need to get into the race, the struggle of faith. And you cannot be in the race at all until you are in right relationship with Jesus Christ. By faith, by trusting in the person, promises and provisions of God as revealed here in His Word, you must know and receive Christ to be the great and only high priest who has offered up the only and perfect sacrifice for all your sin, believing that He has offered you the blessings of the promised New Covenant whereby your sins are forgiven, meaning your sins are no longer a hindrance between you and God; that the LORD is your God and by His grace and the exercise of God-given faith, you long to love and serve Him.

For here is the gospel according to the book of Hebrews. First, in Hebrews 3:1 we must know Christ as our high priest –

**Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession...**

---

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Next, according to Hebrews 7:25, we must believe that this high priest represents us, personally, before God and will do so eternally. We read –

***Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.***

And additionally, in Hebrews 10:14, we must, by faith, believe that this high priest has fully paid the price of our sin on the cross and that by His work alone we are sanctified, made holy, fit for heaven. We read there –

***For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.***

This “faith” – this trust in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done is “the race” – it is the struggle that you are called to today. The struggle is not in believing it, for you either do or you don’t. The struggle is living the rest of your life by faith, in accordance with God’s word, in a world that is unfriendly toward the life of faith and an enemy that is absolutely hostile toward such a life. But the reward for such a life is eternal life. Let us all here be those who run the race.

And just how is this race to be run? We see a qualifier added here. It is to be run “**with endurance.**” The idea behind the word “endurance” is a steadfast consistency and confidence; consistency and confidence in God and His word. The word “endurance” literally speaks of the ability to patiently bear up under a load. It is the noun form of the verb found in the next verse where we are told that Jesus “endured” – that is patiently and consistently bore the load of the cross. This again reminds us the Christian life is not easy. Now don’t get the wrong idea, not being easy is not the same as not being joyful or worthwhile. In fact, don’t we generally agree that the best things of life are worth working for. If this be true generally, how much more spiritually? The great preacher, William Barclay described endurance this way,

*“That determination, unhasting and unresting, unhurrying and yet undelaying, which goes steadily on, and which refuses to be deflected. Obstacles will not daunt it; delays will not depress it; discouragements will not take its hope away. It will not halt neither for discouragement from within or without.”*

Beloved, this is how to run the race of faith – with such an endurance, with such a determination to be in the race, determined to lay aside the entanglements of sin; determined to lay aside the encumbrances that weigh us down; and determined to find encouragement in the examples of faith that have gone before us.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

---

Copyright © 2007 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, 2300 South 13<sup>th</sup> Street Rogers, AR 72758.