

Features of a race that teach us about the Christian life

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon at Poplar Baptist Church on 17th March 2019

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12.1 – 3)

Introduction

In this passage the writer to the Hebrews describes the Christian life as a race, and urges us to run that race with perseverance. The passage has much to instruct us about the Christian life, and, is very much contrary to the ideas that prevail in our present society, ideas which have come into the church. We are told on many fronts that the whole purpose of life is to be happy. We should be “cool”, and not get too stressed about life. We should take life easy and enjoy ourselves. But here in this passage the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Christian life as a challenging race, in which we need to exert ourselves to the utmost, and continue to do so.

Let us think about a number of features of a race, and how they apply to the Christian life.

1. A race is a public event

A race takes place in public. When this letter was written, races were events which took place in a stadium, and a large proportion of the whole town would have turned out to see them.

In these days of mass media, millions of people will see the performance of athletes in some races.

So, the race of the Christian life in which we are engaged is run publicly.

The apostle says in verse 1, "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..." There is some debate as to the interpretation of the word "witnesses." Are these witnesses those who testify to the power of God in the past? Or are they witnesses of our walk with God now? I think we can interpret it in both ways. In the light of the example of those who have gone before us, we can and should be encouraged to run our race with energy and perseverance. But also we should be aware that our heroes of the faith are watching us from heaven, to see how we do in our race. They are, as it were, the spectators to cheer us on.

The non-Christian world is also watching us to see how we do. We have great potential to bring glory to God by the way that we live, but also great potential to bring dishonour on the name of Christ by our inconsistent life.

The angels and demons are also watching us to see how we do. In Ephesians chapter 3 verse 8, God says that the purpose of his revealing that, through the Gospel, both Jews and Gentiles are made God's people, was "that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."

We are God's showpiece to the principalities and powers. We need to make sure that we live up to our calling.

Most of all, our lives are being watched by Almighty God, before whom nothing is hidden, and to whom we must all give an account.

We need to realise that there is no such thing as a "private life". Sometimes politicians do not like it when a newspaper exposes what they get up to in private. They say, "That is my private life. What I do in private should remain private." But the Scripture tells us that God knows everything that we say and do, and what we think. Jesus warns us that on the final day, if not before, everything about our lives, good and bad, will be exposed publicly. Jesus said, as recorded in Luke 12 verses 1 to 3,

Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark

will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.

On the final day, how you have lived your life, whether you have lived it well or badly, whether you have used the gifts and the opportunities that God has given you, will be publicly revealed and examined by God in front of the whole world for all to see, and you will be either commended or ashamed. John writes in his first letter chapter 3 verse 28, “And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.”

So let us remember that our lives are on display. The way we live will either bring glory to God or dishonour to him; it will either cause us to be commended by God, who will say “well done good and faithful servant” or to be rebuked by God, who will say, “you wicked, lazy servant.”

2. To run a race well we need to not carry any excess weight

The writer says, “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”

Think about the lengths to which athletes will go to in order to reduce weight, so that they can run most effectively. They will wear super lightweight clothing, and wear trainers that are specially engineered to be strong and light. They will carefully control their food intake, so that they have the highest possible muscle to fat ratio, and are not carrying any unnecessary weight.

So we must throw off everything that hinders. Sin hinders us in the race that we are to run. Sin is like a dead weight on us. The writer also describes it as being like rope that binds itself around a runner, and stops him from being able to run.

How foolish it would be for a competitor in a race to load himself down with heavy and cumbersome clothing, or to sow lead weights into his clothing! He might want to do that when training, but in the actual race he will want to get rid of every ounce of unnecessary weight. Otherwise he will ruin his chances of success.

So, we who are believers, need make sure that we get rid of all those things that would hinder us. in the spiritual race that we are called to run,

There is a similar idea in 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 24 to 27, where the apostle Paul says,

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Paul says that he exercises tight self-discipline. He “beats” his body to make it his slave. He is determined not to allow sin to take control.

We need to examine ourselves constantly to see if sinful thoughts or patterns of behaviour have come in, and repent from these as soon as we are aware of them. Is there pride, or greed, or lust, or bitterness, or envy, or idolatry, or anger lurking in your heart? Are you nursing some sort of grudge against God, or against another person? Is there some way in which God has spoken to you, perhaps through a sermon, or through a book you have read, and highlighted a sin that is in your life, but you are refusing to do what God has told you to do? A sin that you do not repent of is going to be like a massive deadweight upon you as you run the race of the Christian life.

But it is not only direct and obvious sins that can hinder us as we run this spiritual race. Things that are not sinful in themselves can become a hindrance to our growth as Christians, if we give them undue prominence in our lives. In the parable of the sower, as recorded in Matthew chapter 13, Jesus talks about the seed that gets choked by weeds. He says that this seed represents the person who “hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful” (verse 32). It is not wrong to give some attention to the concerns of this life, whether they be health concerns, family concerns, work concerns or political and social concerns. It is not sinful to earn money and to spend it. But we can become too preoccupied with these things, and this can greatly hinder our progress as Christians.

Jesus warns us, as recorded in Luke’s Gospel chapter 21 verse 34 Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”

Paul says in 1 Timothy chapter 6 verses 9 and 10,

People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

We need to run a “tight ship” and not become too engrossed in the things of this world. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 3 and 4, “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No-one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs — he wants to please his commanding officer.” We need to make sure that we are not distracted from the main task in hand which is to run the Christian race. Everything needs to be subsumed to that great goal. An athlete that is in training for an Olympic race is focussed on one goal for months: winning the race. Whatever he eats, whatever he drinks, what day job he does, how he spends his time, how he spends his money: these are all controlled by one great theme: he wants to be in tip top condition to win that great race. So it should be with us. We should be controlled by one great theme in all our decisions: what will most help the spiritual race that we are running in our Christian life.

3. Running a race involves hard work

The writer says in verse 2 of our passage, “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Running involves a great deal of exertion. You have to put all your energy into it. You get out of breath. Your muscles ache. Your heart pounds. You feel exhausted afterwards.

So the Christian life involves hard work. Reading the Bible is hard work. Prayer can be a big effort. Coming out to meetings of the church involves putting yourself out. Loving others involves sacrifice. The work of evangelism involves hard graft. In addition there is the hard effort of fighting sin. Then there is the hardship that comes from persecution. It is far easier to compromise and avoid persecution than to remain faithful to Christ and to take the persecution that comes with such faithfulness.

In Colossians chapter 1 verse Colossians 28 to chapter 2 verse 1, the apostle Paul says,

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully

works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.

The word translated “labour” is a word which speaks of hard, back breaking toil. The word translated “struggling” is the word from which we get our English word agony. Both words speak about the sheer hard work of serving Christ, and working for his kingdom.

4. Running a race involves perseverance

The writer says, “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Sometimes in a race an athlete will start really fast with a great burst, but then run out of breath half way through the race and stop.

So sometimes there are those who start off well in the Christian life. They look like they are going to be really fruitful believers, but they give up, and stop running. Sometimes they drop out of the race altogether and give up any profession to be believers. There are various reasons why this might happen, such as discouragement, suffering or persecution.

Jesus warned about this in the parable of the sower, which I mentioned just now. He spoke about those who are like the seed that fell in shallow soil. The seed germinates and starts to grow, but then it shrivels and dies. Jesus says that this represents the person who “hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away” (Matthew 13.20).

To be fruitful, we must keep on with our faith and with our service of Christ.

5. To run a race well you need to be focussed on the goal

The writer says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

The goal of the race of the Christian life is Christ. One day we shall see him face to face, and when we see him we shall be like him. We shall reign with him in glory.

We should fix our eyes on who Jesus is. He is described as the author and perfecter of our faith. By saying he is the “author” of our faith, the writer means that he is the originator, or champion, the prince, the forerunner. By saying that he is the “perfecter”, the writer means that Jesus is the one who brings us to perfection. He is going to bring to glory all those who truly believe.

We should also fix our eyes on what he did. The writer says that “For the joy set before him endured the Cross.” What motivated Jesus was the thought that he would be returning to glory, and that he would be rewarded for all the suffering that he went through.

The writer says that Jesus “scorned the shame”. In other words, he thought very little of the shame of the Cross. It did not bother him. It is not that it was not painful. It was extremely painful, but next to the great reward that he would have in heaven, the pain was as nothing.

So, says the writer, we should fix our eyes on Jesus as we run our race. When we focus on the sufferings of Jesus it helps us to see our present sufferings in perspective. When we focus on the glory that Jesus now has, it helps us to see that it is worth going through our present sufferings and difficulties.

We should not look back, but look forward to Jesus in glory. Jesus said, as recorded in Luke chapter 9 verse 62, "No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Also, the apostle Paul writes, in Philippians chapter 3 verses 12 to 14,

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Some Christians look back nostalgically to some golden age in the past, and wish that they were alive then and not now. Some look back to some period when they were particularly happy. But we shall never be able to run the race of the Christian life if we are constantly looking over our shoulders. We need to fix our eyes on the future, on Christ in heaven, and on the reward which will be ours as we serve him.

Conclusion

We have seen from this passage how the Christian life is like a race. We have seen five things about a race which are relevant for the Christian life:

1. A race is public.
2. To be able to do well in a race, you need to shed excess weight.
3. A race involves hard work.
4. Running a race involves perseverance.
5. To run well you need to focus on the goal.

Where are you in this race?

Have you started the race? To start the race, you must be born again. Have you been born again? If you are in any doubt about whether you have been born again, come to Christ. Ask him to save you, and ask him to do in you the miracle of the rebirth.

If you believe you are born again, how is it going now? Are you making progress in your Christian life? Are you running, or merely strolling? Have you stopped? Have you allowed yourself to be distracted? Have sins come into your life to hinder you? Have you taken your eyes off Jesus, and is your focus on yourself, or on the past? May the Lord give us all grace to get started again in the race if we have stopped, and to run with perseverance the race that God has laid before us, looking to Jesus.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=31719175482166>

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