

Heb. 12:1-3

The Christian Race (A Pep Rally)

1. Introduction

- a. My subtitle for this text is “a pep rally”. Perhaps you might need one this morning.
- b. When I was in third grade, I wanted to be a Paleontologist because of all the cool dinosaurs. I would go around to the classes and give a presentation on my large collection of plastic replicas. I didn’t learn until much later that some of the things I read were untrue.
- c. By the time I had hit 9th grade, my passion had morphed from dinosaurs to cars. I had a large collection of model cars I built, having also Corgis and Matchbox replicas. But by then, I decided that I wanted to build and race cars. I wanted to win the Indy 500. To say that I was naïve is an understatement. Obviously, the Lord had other ideas. But I still like auto racing, which might be why I like the figures of a race in the Bible.
- d. The Bible mentions a *Christian* race eight times. We find it in Paul’s letters five times, Luke twice, and then in Hebrews (I Cor. 9:24-27; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 3:12; Acts 13:25; 20:24; II Tim. 4:7).
- e. But we are going to look at just one text, Heb. 12:1-3. But it’s not a race that you can run with your legs, or your wheels. We run this race by faith.
- f. *But first I need to explain the starting line.* One must be saved to start this race (Jn. 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 6:23). You can’t even *start* this race unless you have accepted Christ through faith. You can’t even have an *entry* into this race unless you have already trusted the Lord Jesus as your savior
- g. *And I also need to explain the finish line.* The destination of heaven is already assured to believers (Jn. 5:24). It is a present possession. The finish line is the *beima*, unfortunately often translated as the *judgment* seat of Christ (II Cor. 5:10). The word comes from the Greek games. The *beima* was the judge’s stand that gave out awards, medals, and wreaths (*stephanos*). It was not a place where the athlete was punished. At the *Beima*, we won’t be judged. Our *works* will be evaluated and rewarded or not (Rom. 8:1).

2. :1a “On your mark...”: So great a cloud of witnesses...”

- a. I’m not certain how they began the races in the 1st century AD. I just know that they didn’t fire a gun or say, “drivers, start your engines”.
- b. A great cloud sounds like a large group, and sure enough, it is. As you may have heard before, when you see the word, “therefore”, in the Bible, go and see what it is there for. In this case, it is chapter 11 of our book of Hebrews. We sometimes call it, the “Hall of Faith”. Many of our favorite Bible characters, heroes and heroines actually, are in that chapter. And they constitute the cloud of witnesses. And they, as the author said of one of the witnesses, “though dead, still speaks” (Abel – 11:4). But they were not just spectators or cheerleaders, but *finished contestants*. Howard Hendricks used to say that Christianity is not a spectator sport, like football. Twenty-two thousand fans, who

desperately need exercise, watching twenty-two players, who desperately need rest. The witnesses in chapter 11 have reached the finish line through faith, and have received their reward.

- c. By the way, the word translated witness is *martyra*, from which Justin the Martyr got his name. "Martyr wasn't his last name, but meant that he was a witness, one giving testimony. And the word morphed into a person who died for their faith and testimony. According to my great-grandmother, he was a distant ancestor. But there is no documentation of that, just an oral tradition.
 - d. When I was a kid, I almost died from asthma. Back in those days they didn't have these amazing inhalers and meds that extend the life of asthmatics. I was given some red liquid and some green liquid. They both tasted horrible and neither helped. To this day, I think that both meds were 50 proof alcohol to keep the patient relaxed. I think that they were hoping to keep the patient calm to prevent an attack. I wasn't allowed to go out and run and play like other kids, which was depressing for a young boy. But then I was sent to a specialist, a German Jewish doctor named Dr. Zavon. She said to throw away the worthless medicine and "go out for z sports", especially long running events. To say that I was overjoyed would be a gross understatement.
 - e. So, the first sport I entered was track. Back then, the longest running event was the mile run. But I was terrible. In addition to having asthma, being out of shape, and having flat feet, I wasn't built like a runner. In addition to perfectly flat feet, my torso is long and my legs are short, so I have a squatty body. Since I graduated from high school, I have lost 2 ½ inches in height, so I am even squattier. I worked very hard but I was never any good, *that is*, when compared to the others. At first, I was so bad that, not only would I get lapped, but sometimes folks would wander onto the track, thinking the race was over. I had to often dodge around these people to finish my race.
 - f. The Henderson brothers in my school were intelligent, good-looking, and natural athletes. Some of their school records might still stand. But Larry Henderson would be down there next to the track cheering me on. You see, he was a finished contestant, having run the race well. I have to say that I got a little extra motivation when he was cheering. He was like those witnesses in chapter 11, finished contestants.
3. 1b "Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us..."
- a. A Nascar driver just got disqualified, and thrown out of the championship, for not having enough weight in his car. The cars are weighed because the lighter a car is, the faster it will go. In the Greek games, the men originally ran naked. Even today, athletes will wear minimal clothing in order to run their fastest. When I finally got the go ahead to run as a kid, I would run all the time up-and-down the one lane road in front of our farmhouse. My brother had some leg weights that he wasn't using. They attached around the ankles and you could add or subtract weight using lead inserts. It wasn't long before I had added the maximum number of weights. What do you suppose happened when I removed the weights after running with them for months? I felt faster than a scalded cat.
 - b. Just as in a foot race, some things can slow us down in our *Christian* race. What slows me down may not be the same thing that slows you down. We need to identify those

things in our lives that interfere with our race. We need to run as light as possible. The race isn't over until the Lord calls us home. So, we need a sense of urgency, because the time might be short.

4. 1c "Let us run with endurance..."

- a. The word translated endurance is *hupomenei*, which has the meanings of endurance, standing firm, or perseverance, which I like. This isn't a sprint. It's a long-distance race, a marathon. It's not a drag race or even a 500 miler. It's more like the 24 hours of Le Mans. That means that if we sin or made a mistake, there is time to get back into the game. This race belongs to the proverbial tortoise. But there is also a lot of racing left.
- b. These Hebrew Christians were being persecuted for their faith. So, they are being encouraged to remove anything from their lives which is slowing them down.
- c. As we see in chapter 11, Abraham waited 25 years for the promise of a son. And then he was asked to offer him up in sacrifice. We may be running for a long time to come, but we need to be like Abraham, and run with endurance.

5. :2 "Fixing our eyes on Jesus..."

- a. This doesn't mean staring at a picture of Jesus, as if we even knew what He looked like. They didn't have camera phones then, anyway. It means focusing on Who He is and what He has done for us, as we are about to do in our communion service.
- b. Satan is always trying to get us sidetracked, to get us off of the racecourse for a shortcut. There are no shortcuts in the Christian life.
- c. "The author and perfecter of our faith..." means the pioneer; our **leader, as in "follow the leader"**.
- d. "Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross". Remember that word for endurance? This is the verb form of the same word, *hupomeno*. He endured as an example in enduring. So, should we.
- e. "Despising the shame..." Crucifixion was not for Roman citizens but slaves, foreigners, and criminals. Jesus was, in effect, getting the blame for the entire world's sin.
- f. "Has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God..." What do you do when you finish your work? You sit down, right? My choice is a soft recliner. His is His heavenly throne. "Sat down" here is the perfect tense, which is why He is called the perfecter or finisher. The last thing He said on the cross was, "It is finished (John 19:30)".

6. :3 If we consider what He did for us, we won't get so discouraged in our Christian race because He went to a *lot* of trouble for us. What He did is a lot harder than anything that is in our races.

- a. But I do have to say that the path for our races may get rougher in the future. I think that we are already seeing some pushback against Christians these days. That pushback has always been there. But, in my opinion, it is ramping up these days in America. (Freedom of speech is at risk. For years, we have been restricted from presenting Creation Science in the classroom. You can even get fined for using the wrong pronoun. Or you can get into trouble for not baking a cake for a same sex wedding. Recently, Roman Catholics were called a threat to national security by the Feds. And just the other day, our own governor mocked communion.)
- b. So, please vote on Tuesday, if you haven't yet. And pray! Please pray!

7. Application

- a. As we have learned before, these Hebrew Christians were under a lot of pressure. Nero was blaming Christians for the burning of Rome, when in fact, it was he who started the fire. These Hebrew Christians in Rome were really feeling the heat, pun intended. They had been put out of the synagogue, even before the fire. Some lost their means of income, much like those believers in Jerusalem after Pentecost and the thousands of conversions to Christ. Some lost their homes. And some, as we learn from chapter thirteen, were even put into jail.
- b. So, these converted Jews just thought that if they could disguise themselves as regular Jews by just returning to all of the old practices, they would escape the pressure. It would be something like wearing a Halloween suit that stays under the Mosaic Law, when instead they were Jewish Christians on the inside. And so, the author of Hebrews through much of the book argues that Christ and Christianity are vastly superior to the old dispensation.
- c. So, these Jewish Christians were under some severe peer pressure we might say. We might not be experiencing anything to the degree that they did. But there is always pressure on a believer. In modern terms, we would call this codependency. This is when our behavior and attitudes are shaped by trying to earn the favor of those around us, worrying about what others think about us. We see this most in adolescents, who try to curry favor with their peer groups. If people mature as they are supposed to, they should care less what others think about them, being secure within. Unfortunately, many adults still fall under this disease of codependency. Of course, this has been going on since Jesus was first on the scene: John 12:43, "...they love the approval of man rather than the approval of God".
- d. When I was running the mile on my old track team, I quickly learned that even though I was usually last place, *I was really competing against myself (Gal. 6:3-5)*. When I started out, my times in the mile were over 12 minutes. By the time track season was over, my personal record was six minutes and twenty seconds. The Christian race is the same. We're not competing against others, because everyone's race is different. God has a race just for you and no one else. It's unique. We also have different gifts in order to run this race. You may not have the same gifts as someone else, you may not be as fast, so to speak, *but you can work just as hard*. So, don't compare yourself to the next person in the pew.
- e. Over the years, I have worked with some recovering alcoholics. They are some of the nicest people I have ever met. But they are almost universally codependent. Because they constantly fail at their own standards of pleasing those around them, they resort to self-medicating with alcohol. At some point, I discovered a great book on this issue, written by a recovering alcoholic, Melodie Beattie, called Codependent No More. It offers terrific insights into the issue, although it isn't a Christian book *pe se*'. I would suggest it for anyone who might struggle with people-pleasing. I mentioned earlier that I quit comparing myself to others on the track, I would focus on comparing myself to myself. It really resulted in a weight being lifted off of my shoulders, as I didn't need to try and be better than someone else, but better than myself, which I accomplished.

- f. But I would add the solution offered to the Hebrew Christians. We need to focus on our relationship to Christ and His enabling power. If we are concerned with *His* approval, we will be less concerned with the approval of others.

