

Running The Course

Hebrews 12:1-3

Introduction

1. The book of Hebrews was written primarily for the benefit of Jewish Christians in danger of returning to Judaism to escape persecution.
 - a. The book's aim is to demonstrate the superiority of the Christ over Moses and the angels and, consequently, of the New Covenant over the Old.
 - b. In the previous chapter the saints were treated to a roll call of men and women approved by God for their faith.
2. These Christians would have also been familiar with the allusion to the races that were part of the games put on across the Roman Empire, and, therefore, were able to make the much needed application.
 - a. Like an athlete, a Christian is called to a life of discipline and sacrifice in pursuit of the ultimate goal (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 2:5; James 1:12).
 - b. The Christians were, therefore, encouraged to view their struggle as a race and to heed the advice offered to them on how to run the course and finish the race as winners (cp. 2 Timothy 3:12).

I. Shape Up!

- A. In order to compete in a race in which one hopes to win, it is important for the athletes to be at their best physical condition; likewise, Christians are to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us" (cp. Heb. 12:1a).
 1. The "laying aside of every encumbrance" or "weight" (AV) has reference not just to the physical condition of the athletes but to their physical attire:
 - a. "Its usual meaning is that of weight or burden, and there is an allusion here, doubtless, to runners in the games who were careful not to encumber themselves with anything that was heavy. Hence, their clothes were so made as to not impede their running, and hence, they were careful in their training not to overburden themselves with food, and in every way to remove what would be an impediment or hindrance...As applied to Christians it means that they should remove all which would obstruct their progress in the Christian course. Thus, it is fair to apply it to whatever would be an impediment in our efforts to win the crown of life" (Barnes).
 2. The particular impediment of the Hebrew Christians who were being persecuted and having their goods confiscated was the "sin of unbelief" and doubt (cp. Heb. 3:12; 6:11-12; 10:23, 39).
 - a. Israel's unfaithfulness to God in the wilderness was a result of doubt in His power and faithfulness to His word (Num. 14:1-10; Jos. 5:6).
 - b. Doubt is an impediment to a Christian's ability to grow in service to God and can lead to his or her unfaithfulness (cp. Jas. 1:6-8; Matt. 6:33-34; 1 Pet. 5:6; Heb. 11:6).
 - c. Other things that can impede us include the fear of persecution, pride, and worldliness (2 Tim. 3:12; Matt. 10:28; 1 Pet. 3:14; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Tim. 6:9-10).

II. Having Eyes on the Goal

- A. Both in preparation for a competition and in the course of it, fixing one's eyes on the goal focuses, not just the mind of the athlete, but the energy and efforts; likewise, we need to fix our eyes of Jesus (Heb. 12:2-3).
 1. It is one thing to exemplify the faith of those that have gone before, as in Old and New Testament times, but in Jesus we have our single object and goal:
 - a. "We are exhorted to look to Him, as if at the Grecian games there was one stood before the racer who had previously carried away every palm of victory; who had always been triumphant, and with whom there was no one who could be compared" (Barnes).
 - b. "This is still an illusion to the Grecian games; those who ran were to their eyes fixed on the mark of the prize; they must keep the goal in view" (Clarke's).

2. Keeping our eyes on Jesus will prevent us from losing sight of the value of the prize and what is required if we are to overcome the obstacles we encounter (cp. Heb. 6:18-20 cf. Col. 1:18; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; 1 Pt. 1:3).
 - a. Jesus not only represents the hope for which are striving, but the virtue and strength of endurance through trial and persecution (cp. Heb. 5:7-8; 1 Peter 2:21-23).
 - 1) “Steadfastness, constancy, endurance...in the NT the characteristic of a man who is swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings” (Thayer).
 - b. It is only when we are faithful to God through a continual keeping of His commandments that we show endurance and are not swerved from the ultimate prize of heaven (cp. Heb. 10:36-38 cf. Rom. 2:7).
 - 1) Endurance entails that we don't bow or buckle under the pressures of physical and emotional persecution or affliction (cp. Matt. 5:11-12; 10:34-39; 1 Cor. 7:15; Jas. 5:4-6; 1 Pt. 2:12).
 - 2) Focusing on Jesus rather than on the pain and suffering of trial will help us to learn the importance of obedience and the avenue of prayer as a means to God's help (cp. Heb. 4:14-16; 5:7-8).

Conclusion

1. As Christians, we need to appreciate the fact that we have been called to a lifetime of obedience to the will of God and that there will be many obstacles along the way in order to lead us away not just from faithfully serving God but away from the ultimate goal and prize of an eternal home in heaven (Rom. 6:4).
2. Whether it be physical persecution or some form of physical suffering inflicted upon us because of our faith and commitment to serving our Lord, the Christian must looked to Christ for the example and strength he or she needs to stay the course and finish the race as winners, to be eternally with God in heaven (Phil. 4:12-15).