

A Better Race

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of October 2003. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Better Race and is based on Hebrews 12, verses 1-13. And you may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 978.

It's from Hebrews chapter 12. And as I mentioned at the beginning of the service, we're continuing our sermon series on this letter to the Hebrews. And let's pray.

O God, we thank you that you cause all Holy Scripture to be written for us, for our edification, correction, rebuke and training in righteousness. And we pray that your Spirit will take these words and write them on our hearts, that we may finally obtain the peaceful fruit of righteousness in your presence.

Amen. It's half time, or perhaps at this time of year, the tea interval. And the team tramps off the ground, weary, dispirited, discouraged, disheartened.

[1 : 22] The opposition has been steadily wearing them down. They started well, but before this interval, things have got worse. And so by the time they trudge off the ground slowly, drooping shoulders, weary limbs, they are feeling pretty down in the dumps.

And as they stand around in the club room during the break from the game, the coach directs them to the pictures on the wall in the club rooms.

Because there surrounding them in the club rooms are the pictures of each of the members of the Hall of Fame. The champions of yesterday, the ones who played the game and won, played to the full, full of grit and determination, those who never gave up the fight or the game.

They lasted the distance. Now it's your turn. They're the inspiring examples to motivate you. Now it's your turn to play to the full.

But before the team goes back on the ground, the coach reminds them of one other thing. He says, before you go back out, take off that heavy rucksack that you've been carrying around through the first half of the game.

[2 : 42] Take off the weights that are strapped to your legs. Take off your thick overcoat and gloves and hat and scarf and umbrella so that you keep the rain and the dirt off you.

What a ludicrous picture. To think of a sporting team in any sport running around with an overcoat, an umbrella, weight strapped to their leg and a great big rucksack on their back.

You don't see any sporting players wearing things like that. Imagine going to watch Ian Thorpe swimming in an Olympic final and up all the swimmers get on the blocks wearing those sort of thin bodysuits and here comes Ian Thorpe wearing an overcoat and a hat and scarf and gloves and great big Wellington boots.

You'd think if you bet on him your money's lost. Well, more arduous than sport is the Christian life. More serious, of course, than sport is the Christian life. Not a short sprint but a long marathon slog at times and it's easy during our Christian lives to feel disheartened, dispirited, discouraged, weary, heavy laden in the midst of Christian life and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is like the coach, the pastor, writing to what we've called faith drifters, people who in the middle of their life are feeling a bit down in the dumps in Christian life.

They're tempted to give up. They're facing increasing opposition and they've been tempted to give way and buckle under the opposition or even persecution that they face.

[4 : 20] They've been tempted to switch to the joys, pleasures and ease of this world in which they live. And last week we saw in Hebrews chapter 11 a long list of key characters whom I called the Hall of Faith rather than the Hall of Fame.

The champions of yesteryear from the Old Testament, Abraham and Moses most notably, but briefer mentions of Abel and Enoch and Joshua and David and Samuel and others as well. They are the ones who endured opposition, the ones who in some cases even face death for being believers. Those who face trials and difficulty in their lives but persevered in faith in God. They are the cloud of witnesses that the beginning of this chapter describes. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. It's as though we're in the club rooms and there around us are the penpicks of the heroes of faith of the Old Testament.

But it's not that they're witnesses of us. It's not as though they're somehow now in heaven, the saints of old, looking down on us and watching us in our Christian life. It's rather that they are witnesses as examples of perseverance in faith.

[5 : 43] It's not that they look at us but more in a sense that we ought to cast an eye at them and be encouraged, even inspired, by their examples.

Notice then, as we've seen last week and picking up the beginning of chapter 12 this week, the importance of the Old Testament for Christians.

Sometimes we find it too hard, too long, too difficult and we put it to one side. But here at least one point about the Old Testament is this, that it gives us examples of persevering believers that ought to encourage us and spur us on day by day, week by week in Christian faith, in Christian perseverance.

Of course, the Old Testament is more than that. It's not just stories of examples but that at least it is. And so the stories of Abel and Enoch and Abraham and Moses and Joshua and David and Samuel and all the others that the writer of Hebrews didn't get time to mention in chapter 11 are at least in part to encourage us to keep on, to persevere even in the midst of difficulty, strife, opposition, trouble, trial, whatever.

So then the writer says, therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us also, like them that is, lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.

[7 : 18] You see, it's ludicrous for Ian Thorpe to swim with weights and overcoats and so on. It's ludicrous for a sporting person in whatever game to be laid and down carrying a rucksack or something in their game.

It's just as ludicrous if not more so that Christians so often live their lives and run the Christian race carrying unnecessary, indeed hindering, burdens, lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.

You see, so many of us live our Christian lives with sin clinging on to us that we're not wanting to cast aside. Sin clings but we let it cling.

It hinders us in the Christian race and yet so often we run the Christian race almost oblivious to it prepared to carry the weight.

Consider the Christian who's so preoccupied with earthly wealth that it compromises their Christian race, their Christian faith, their Christian life or the Christian who's so distracted by lust that his eyes are always diverting to whoever is around him rather than focused on the glories of Jesus Christ or the Christian who's trying to run the race but balancing on the one hand living for themselves and promoting their own ego with living for God in an act of service and so rather than running freely the race they're trying to keep everything in balance and not let it topple over.

[8 : 59] The Christian race is about shedding sin so that we become more like Jesus and fit and ready for the presence of God in glory and just as you don't see Ian Thorpe wearing overcoats or his legs tied together when he swims or Cathy Freeman running in high heel shoes we ought not run the Christian race hindered, hampered, weighed down by the burdens of sin.

I mean one reason why we so often carry around sin is because it's got pleasure about it. If it had no pleasure we'd never sin but as we saw last week its pleasures are fleeting especially by comparison to the solid joys of heaven.

I remember a Christian friend from my youth who in the end gave up the Christian race decided that he was going to make more money get a better job pursue wealth work longer hours and in the end his Christian race was so hindered weighed down and compromised that he stopped and he gave it up.

I remember another friend from a church years and years ago who struggled with sexual temptation and in the end yielded to that temptation and inevitably gradually but inevitably his Christian race stopped.

I know of a Christian minister who after so many years in Christian ministry facing opposition and difficult people became so embittered that his Christian faith withered and though the pretense of Christian ministry continued for a while he'd stopped running the race.

[10:45] And I know of people who have been keen Christians in their youth or student days and against all advice marrying non-Christians their race is hindered and in many cases I know of in the end dried up.

What are you carrying in your life that is slowing you down compromising you hindering you or wearying you in the Christian race? We all carry some things.

Lay it aside the writer says at the beginning of this chapter. Shed it so that you can run the race freely and persevere in the running of the race.

What sin is hindering your Christian perseverance? For many of us we indulge some aspects of sin in our life thinking that we can get away with it but in the end it is a weight that slows us down, that compromises our spiritual faith, our relationship with God and makes us all the more vulnerable to giving up the Christian faith altogether.

So lay aside these things and surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses whom we saw last week in chapter 11 from the Old Testament, above all of those witnesses our eyes are to be fixed on Jesus Christ the writer goes on to say in verse 2.

[12:15] Four things about Jesus he mentions in this verse that are particularly to be the focus of our concentration and when our translation says looking to Jesus it's not just a sort of glimpse from time to time but rather the idea is fix your eyes and concentration on Jesus.

Direct your attention to him. Four things. He's the pioneer of our faith. The one who blazes the trail. The one who carves the way for us to follow.

Not just that he's the first to arrive in heavenly glory though he is but the one who makes the trail possible for others to follow to heavenly glory.

Both Old Testament heroes of faith and we believers today as well. Not only is he the pioneer he's the perfecter of our faith. The one who is so powerful by his death and high priesthood as we've seen in recent months that he is able to perfect us that is make us fit for the presence of God.

The third thing about him that's mentioned in verse 2 is his death on the cross which he endured.

Not just that he was subjected to it unwillingly but that he willingly endured the cross for our benefit as we've seen in earlier chapters of Hebrews.

[13:36] And then fourthly he is now at the right hand of the throne of God seated in heaven. Something that we've seen in more detail in earlier chapters again.

That is when we look to Jesus we don't just look at him as a nice man a good bloke someone who perhaps should have won the Nobel Peace Prize if it was around 2,000 years ago a wise teacher or a miracle worker no the focus of our attention on Jesus is that he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith and that he's endured the cross and now is in heavenly glory where we one day will be because of what he's done for us as our pioneer and perfecter and sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus is to be the focus of our attention. He went through and endured the humiliation, shame and difficulty trial of the cross for the joy of heaven not only for himself but for our benefit as well so that in the midst of our Christian life, in the midst of our trials as we run the race, Jesus in glory is to be our focus.

So consider him, the writer goes on to say in verse 3, who endured such hostility against himself from sinners so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

that is Jesus endured the cross so that we might persevere to the end. Not only as an example for us to look to and be encouraged by but because his endurance of the cross for us strengthens us to persevere to heavenly glory.

[15:22] It's easy to weary of being a Christian. Look to Jesus. It's easy to lose heart as a Christian. Look to Jesus and especially the fact that he's endured the cross and now he's in heavenly glory where he has placed an anchor for our soul as we saw earlier in chapter 6.

Where he has gone, we will go if only we persevere to the end. Now the readers of this letter originally 2,000 years ago had faced persecution.

We saw that two weeks ago at the end of chapter 10. The writer says for them to recall their earlier days when they'd endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, sometimes being partners with those so treated.

Some were put in prison and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your own possessions. They'd started well in the beginning of the race. They'd endured opposition, persecution but not to the point of shedding blood.

That is they hadn't been put to death for their Christian faith. The opposition had been an economic opposition, local but not yet thrown to the lions or crucified like Jesus had been.

[16:48] In the Roman Empire that sort of persecution probably began in the time of Nero in about the late 50s, early 60s AD. But leading up to them there'd already been local, economic, personal persecution and opposition.

That's what these readers had faced, not yet to the point of death like some of those Old Testament heroes had endured and like Jesus of course above all had endured on the cross. Perhaps the writer is expecting that persecution will get worse and he's stealing them for that opposition that might lead to a death sentence.

Hard to comprehend for us in complacent, comfortable Australia that because of being Christian you could be put to death. How would we cope if that happened to us?

Would we renounce our faith, embrace the world's values, turn our back on God and the Lord Jesus Christ? The writer says to these readers and to us, fix your eyes on Jesus who endured the cross, that is death, to arrive in heavenly glory.

Don't give up the race even if one day it means that you're faced with death for being Christian. Our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries of this world know all too well this threat of death for persecution.

[18:11] It's happening in several countries, in Africa, in the Middle East and in Asia. And in other places. And we read from time to time even in our newspapers let alone the Christian press of Christians who are put to death purely for being Christian.

Thank God we don't face that sort of persecution here but how would we cope if we did? My niece and nephew like swimming, they're part of a swimming club and they train very hard in swimming. And from time to time when I watch the Olympics I sort of think gosh it'd be nice to be standing there about to plunge into the pool to swim in an Olympic final but I know it'll never happen for me because I just couldn't ever be bothered getting up at 5am on a cold winter's morning getting into a cold pool and swimming lap after lap after lap.

That doesn't appeal. Plain hard work stupidity if you ask me. But if you're going to last the distance then you need to train and have discipline and just as that is the case for sports so is it also even more so for the Christian life.

If we're to last the distance as Christians we need to be trained, we need to be disciplined for perseverance in Christian faith and that's painful hard work. And if you're like me with physical exercise then you may be like that with the Christian life as well.

[19:38] Embrace the easy bits but turn our back on the difficulties, the hard work, the training and the discipline. So how do we respond to hard work, to difficulty, to trial in Christian life?

We all face it. How do we respond to it? Well sometimes we might just regard it lightly, brush it off, ignore it or show disdain towards it.

Too often we're actually a bit oblivious to the difficulties in our life. We don't actually think about our Christian life and how we actually embrace the trials, the struggles of daily life.

Don't regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. The writer quotes from the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. Too often we fail to see God behind the difficulties in our life.

Maybe we just say well that's Satan at work. A difficulty because it seems to limit the power of God it seems to me. What this passage is telling us is the difficulties come from God ultimately and we can't just brush them off lightly as though it's Satan at work.

[20:45] Or secondly we may just get overwhelmed. We're facing suffering or opposition or just plain trouble or strife or illness in life and we just feel overwhelmed as though somehow God is inflicting us, that God is venting his anger against us.

And so we become embittered against God or we're tempted to just give up the Christian faith. This is too hard. The right response is to receive discipline as a token of God's love.

verse 6 quoting again from Proverbs says, The Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts.

You see when we're disciplined by God, when he tells us no to something that we want, when he guides us through difficult paths, it's not because he hates us but because he loves us.

The Lord's discipline is an expression of his love. Because discipline without love is sadistic cruelty like those pictures of ferocious school teachers in Charles Dickens novels and so on.

[21 : 58] But that's not God. God disciplines us because he loves us. And every parent knows that. Every parent who loves their child disciplines their child. The child may not know that.

I remember my sister when she was very young saying to my parents, If you love me you're going to give me what I want. But precisely because they did love her, they didn't always give her what she wanted. Although too often they did in my opinion.

Speaking as an eldest child. Now parental discipline is imperfect. Parents do their best but it's not always perfect. But the discipline that God exercises on those whom he loves is a perfect discipline. So look down to verses 9 and 10. We had human parents to discipline us and we respected them generally. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the father of spirits and live?

For parents disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them. That is they did a good job but it's not perfect. But God disciplines us for our good because he knows what is best for us and he does it for our benefit always.

[23 : 08] And the purpose of that is in order that we may share God's holiness. You see God disciplines us in our life. He says no to some things which we may want.

He brings us through trials and tribulations for our good and that is not for our enjoyment and for our pleasure but so that we may share God's holiness.

The discipline of the Lord on us is a token of his love because he wants us to be holy like he is and to share in heaven his holiness.

Or as the next verse says, verse 11, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

You're going through strife, trial and tribulation now, suffering of some sort. The end result for those who receive this as discipline from the Lord is the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

[24 : 11] Sometimes we misunderstand what love is and misunderstand what God's love is. Somehow we think that God's love means that he always says yes and gives us what we want and answer all our prayers exactly as we want.

Not so. The love of God is a disciplining love. He wants what is best for us which may not always be what we want. But God's got the big picture in mind.

Not the immediate relief of God take away this pain or trouble or opposition tomorrow. God's looking to eternity and he's wanting us to be fit and ready to share his holy eternity forever with him and the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so here now on earth his disciplining love is getting us ready for that eternity. And what it means is that God loves us. He thinks that we matter. And our being made holy and perfect in his sight is worth the effort and the pain which we undergo here on earth.

So when you're facing trial, tribulation, suffering, difficulty, opposition, persecution even, be thankful that it's an expression of the love of God for you and that he is making you perfect for eternity.

[25 : 30] Making you holy like the Lord Jesus Christ. So then, in the midst of our weary Christian life, tempted to give up, tempted to fall into the world's values, focus on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who endured the cross and its shame and humiliation for the joy set before him where now he is in heaven seated at the right hand of God's throne.

Look to him, consider Jesus, make him the object of your attention and your concentration. So often we advise people to be introspective, to look at yourself, to evaluate your heart, to see your own progress on Christian faith.

That's not where our attention should be. It should be on Jesus, not on ourselves. And when life is difficult, look to Jesus to motivate and strengthen you to keep going and persevere in Christian faith.

When you're tempted to give up on church and Christian fellowship, look to Jesus. And he will bring you back into Christian fellowship because that's part of the perseverance of Christian life.

And when sin clings close to you, cast it aside. Don't carry its extra weight because you become much more vulnerable to giving up along the way.

[26 : 55] And when you're tempted by the world's fleeting promises of pleasure as it seeks to divert you and distract you off the Christian path, look to Jesus and shun the world's tempting pleasures that are sinful.

Christian life doesn't get easier the older you get, it seems to me. In many respects it gets harder, year by year. It's a long haul.

It's a marathon race. We are to look to Jesus each step. Years ago I think in a Formula One Grand Prix, I think it was Nigel Mansell on the home straight leading the Grand Prix, ran out of petrol and failed to finish.

It doesn't matter how old you are or how young you are, we are all vulnerable to not finishing the Christian race. We're to look to Jesus and fix our eyes and attention on him.

And the great encouragement of this passage is that it's not the advice for the super spiritual. It's not the super spiritual who will finish the race, but it's weak Christians, drooping Christians, weary Christians, sinful Christians, lame Christians.

[28 : 13] See how the passage ends in verses 12 and 13. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

Words of great encouragement to us who are weary, disheartened, discouraged, dispirited, weak, drooping, heavy laden, sinners.

Look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and is now seated in glory at the right hand of God's throne.

Look to him, for he is all we need to persevere to our life's end as believers. Amen.

Hear that ■■ open. spend his time doing this. I'm not the spirits that are at the same time.

[29 : 24] Amen. Fans have come to him, turn down to behind to tell your muscles our emotions so you are and bring down.

Jesus of■■ is not running deep!