

March 9/10, 2019

## Run with Endurance

*Christ is Enough Series*

**Hebrews 12:1-3**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Sometimes the Christian life can be discouraging; it can be confusing. Sometimes it just gets really lonely, and to be honest, sometimes it just seems kind of boring. Would it matter to you this morning if you knew that Moses and Abraham and Rahab and Paul and Peter and John, the great heroes of the faith, were actually cheering you on as you run your race? Challenging you, inspiring you, cheering you, not as spectators, but actually as teammates? As teammates, they have run their race; they have passed the baton, and now they're wanting you to run your race as well as they ran theirs. Would that matter to you if you knew that? That's what we want to talk about this morning.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to Hebrews, Chapter 12. Almost all commentators agree that the chapter division at the end of 11 to 12 is just very unfortunate. As you know, the chapter/verse divisions are not inspired; they are put there by editors. Pretty much everybody agrees this is not a good break. Chapter 11 is about these great heroes of the faith. Not only did they live by faith, they died by faith, having never seen the promise fulfilled, but believing with all their hearts that God would keep the promise. They considered themselves aliens and strangers on earth. They were unwilling to settle for this world. They are headed to somewhere better. They see it and welcome it from a distance, and they long for the day when they will see the promise fulfilled of a better city—a heavenly city! But the text ends in chapter eleven, telling us they are actually still waiting. The believers of the first century, they are still waiting. What are they waiting for? Well, they are waiting for us...they are waiting for us! We've taken the baton; now it's our turn to run. They are cheering us on to victory. One day when we pass, we will join them and we will wait until Jesus returns and He ushers in the new heaven and the new earth, and we, together, as the people of God will enter the new heaven and the new earth forever. In light of that, chapter 12, verse 1:

**Therefore, [therefore, in light of what we just talked about] 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, (\*NASB, Hebrews 12:1)**

Now that word **since** is a very important word. Since what he's about to say is true, **let us run with endurance**. So, whatever it is he is going to tell us is meant to inspire us. It's meant to challenge us; it's meant to move us to run our race to the best of our ability all the way until the finish line, when we pass the baton and we take our seat in the grandstands.

Now there is disagreement on what exactly is meant by verse one. There are good and godly people that sit on both sides of this issue. I'm just going to explain to you what I think makes the most sense. There is widespread agreement on a lot of the imagery in verse one. So, when he says **so great a cloud of witnesses**, it's unusual language for us, but it simply meant *a host of witnesses*. But it was more than just a host of witnesses—the host of heroes from chapter 11—but rather it's creating the imagery of the Roman Coliseum, and the **cloud of witnesses** is describing the row after row after row of people in the coliseum up to the clouds, watching the runners run their race.

New Testament Greek scholar A.T. Robertson describes it like this:

*The metaphor refers to the great amphitheater with the arena for the runners and the tiers upon tiers of seats rising up like a cloud.*<sup>1</sup>

Now it's important to understand, pretty much everyone agrees with that—agrees that this is the metaphor; this is the picture being painted here. When he says **a cloud of witness surrounding us**, again that language is very important. He's not just saying these heroes of the faith have gone before us. He is saying they are surrounding us like a cloud, which again creates this imagery of a stadium filled with these saints of old, and they are watching the runners in the race.

Where there is disagreement is around the idea of whether or not these heroes of the past—whether or not those who have died in Christ (which could be your relatives...your friends...your spiritual mentors, whoever it might be)—do they actually see us, at least to some degree? And do they cheer us on in the race, or do they not? That's where the disagreement is.

It's very common in fundamentalist, conservative circles like ours, that people take a pretty strong view that once you die and go to heaven, (and when we're talking about heaven, we're talking about what I refer to as the intermediate heaven) you would go to this intermediate heaven where all are awaiting the return of Christ, and the new heaven and the new earth. So, there's this intermediate period of time. That's what we're talking about here.

Many in our movement would simply say you cannot see what's going on, on the earth...Period!... End of sentence! Over the years, really since we did our *Life after Death* series, I've often asked my fellow preachers, theologians I know, what they think about this. It's interesting how many of them will say, "Well no, of course you can't see what's going on, on earth," to which I reply, "What is the biblical evidence that supports that view of heaven?" To which they just stare at me.

It's very interesting how often we formulate very strong opinions without real biblical support. I find myself asking, "Where do you get that view because I would suggest to you the New Testament suggests otherwise." This is one of those classic texts. To start with the term **witnesses**, what does it mean that these witnesses that gather in the stadium, do they or do they not see? The term itself, the Greek word, is the word from which we get our English word *martyr*. But the origin of this term and how it was primarily used was the idea of an *eyewitness*, such as in a court of law, or a spectator. As a matter of fact, the writer of Hebrews uses it this way in chapter 10, verse 28, as an eyewitness in a court of law. That is the primary usage of the term. Now over time, it evolved a little bit to also include this idea of being a *testifier*, and that's how it's used in chapter 11. It's not the exact same word, but it's kind of a derivative of the term. It's the idea that those great heroes of the faith who gave testimony to their faith in God were considered witnesses. Now you get to chapter 12.

The term in chapter 12, verse one, is exactly the same term as chapter 10, verse 28, *eyewitnesses*. Now if you're just reading the book of Hebrews, which is how the first readers would have heard it,

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1. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Archibald Thomas Robertson, Copyright 1932, Renewal 1960, Baker Book House

they would have heard it read to them in about three to four minutes between chapter 10, verse 28 and chapter 12, verse 1. It would be very unusual for the writer of Scripture to change the definition of a term when it's used in that close proximity. So, if in chapter 10, verse 28 it meant an eyewitness, it's most likely what he's meaning by the exact same term in chapter 12, verse 1. In chapter 11, the term is a derivative of that, which means *someone who gives testimony*, which I think then, also plays into chapter 12, verse 1. The idea is those who have given testimony in chapter 11 are the spectators. In a sense what he's saying is: they aren't actually spectators; they are teammates. They have run their race. This is a relay race; there are no individual races, and as teammates they have passed the baton. They are now in the stands, and they want to cheer on their teammates who are now carrying the baton until we finish our race and join them in the bleachers.

Now that is the most obvious meaning of the text. I also want to read to you comments from a few commentators. I don't normally do this, but it is important that you understand what I'm suggesting this morning is not me out on an island all by myself. It's actually a view that is held by many, many, many Greek New Testament scholars. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, which is a large, multi-volume, scholarly Greek treatment of the language, the writers say this:

*The readers are represented as runners who have entered the arena. They make ready to run by laying aside everything that would impede them. Around them on the stands are the packed ranks of spectators, the cloud of witnesses, who with avid interest follow the course of the runners as eye-witnesses.*<sup>2</sup>

Now what's interesting is then they footnote to the bottom of the page, and make this comment:

*\*\*Expositors often resist this most obvious meaning [of the text]. But B.F. Westcott, in The Epistle to the Hebrews (1889) is forced to admit: "It is impossible to exclude the thought of the spectators in the amphitheater"; cf. Class. Rev., 5 (1891), 21b*<sup>3</sup>

William Lane in his commentary, *The Word Biblical Commentary*, says:

*In the context of the athletic metaphor, it is perhaps natural to think of an amphitheater, with its ascending rows of spectators who gather to watch the games. The participle "surrounded by," particularly suggests that they are witnesses to our efforts...*<sup>4</sup>

Ben Witherington, in his commentary on Hebrews says,

*...but in view of the running metaphor in our context, our author may be thinking of a crowd of spectators watching the race. On the other hand, who are these spectators? They are those who have passed on, being faithful witnesses to God. Our author says there is a great cloud of these witnesses. David deSilva stresses that our author wants his audience to see themselves as surrounded by friendly and encouraging witnesses from the hall of faith, not hostile and violent neighbors wishing them ill.*<sup>5</sup>

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2. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, page 491, Copyright 1967, Wm. B. Erdmann Publishing Co.

3. Ibid.

4. *Word Biblical Commentary Hebrews 9 - 13*, William Lane, page 408, Copyright 1991 Word, Incorporated

5. *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, Ben Witherington III, page 326, Copyright 2007, InterVarsity Press, USA

Thomas Long, in the Interpretation Commentary says:

*The baton has been passed from Abel to Enoch to Noah to Abraham, each runner handing it on to the next. Now it is the congregation's turn to run. The previous runners have taken their seats in the stadium – “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” – and all are watching to see how we will perform.*<sup>6</sup>

One more—Leon Morris in his commentary in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, says:

*Perhaps we should think of something like a relay race where those who have finished their course and handed in their baton are watching and encouraging their successors.*<sup>7</sup>

I could go on and on, but it is a widely-held opinion by many scholars that there is some level of awareness by those who have gone before us. And they take their seat in the bleachers, so to speak, and they cheer us on as the runners who now have the baton. We're teammates. It matters to them; we're all in the same race together.

Now when we're talking about a metaphor, it's always possible to push a metaphor too far. Any metaphor breaks down if you push it too far. But we're not talking about pushing this metaphor too far; we're talking about the fundamental meaning of the metaphor. Everybody agrees that's the picture. So, if it's true that the spectators can't actually see the runners, the metaphor makes no sense. If all the writer is saying is that those who have gone before us somehow inspire us, then use a different metaphor. The whole point of the metaphor is they're in the bleachers watching the runners run the race. That's the core of the metaphor. It's hard to imagine how it could mean something else.

So think of it this way: We know for sure that the angels watch; we know that they see. There are a number of biblical texts that talk about the angels watching and the angels seeing. Sometimes when we think of heaven, we think of something geographically *out there* somewhere, and maybe that is true. But a lot of scholars think it's not like that; it's more like a realm. If you think of tuning in a radio station, you have all these frequencies in the air, and you just tune one in. Then you tune another one in. It's more like a realm that is here, that is tuned in, and tuned out. If you think of it like that, it makes sense. We have a lot of passages where the angels watch and see. We know that.

Think about Luke 15 where it says, “*In the presence of angels there is rejoicing whenever a sinner repents.*” They obviously see and they celebrate. But you also have some very interesting passages such as in 1 Samuel. When Saul is in trouble, he goes to the medium. He calls up Samuel. Samuel seems to genuinely come back from the dead, and he gets into a conversation with Saul. If you go back and read that passage, Samuel is very clear on what Saul was doing before Samuel died. But he's also very clear on what Saul has been doing since Samuel died. He seems to be very aware of that.

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6. *Interpretation, Thomas G. Long, page 128, Copyright 1997 John Knox Press*

7. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Hebrews, Leon Morris, page 133, Copyright 1981, The Zondervan Corporation*

You have a similar dynamic when Moses and Elijah meet with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. They seem to be aware of what's happening with Jesus, and they seem to be aware of what's about to happen with Jesus.

One real interesting passage is Revelation chapter six where the martyrs are actually talking to Jesus about what is happening on earth. And they are bothered by what's happening and they are asking Jesus, "How long are You going to let this continue?" It seems very clear that they see and are aware; that's the whole point of the passage, and it leads them to have this conversation with Jesus. What else is interesting is they seem disturbed by what's happening, which does raise an interesting question. People would say, "Now wait a minute! You can't really see what's happening on earth because *there's no more tears, no more sorrow in heaven.*" Well, the martyrs seem to be genuinely agitated, and it's important to remember that the passage that says no more tears, no more sorrow, is at the introduction of the new heaven and the new earth, and not before that.

Here's something to think about: When you're absent from the body, you're present with the Lord. That's what the Scriptures say. So you're in the presence of Jesus. So, what would Jesus be most focused on in heaven? This idea that somehow we're removed, on a cloud, just going on without any concern for what's happening on earth, what sense does that make? We know for sure that the focus of Jesus is on His Church. His Church is engaged in a battle, and until the battle is won, Jesus sits as Head of the Church, focused on the battle that's going forth. So if you're in the presence of Jesus, what would be your focus? What sense does it make that you would be off, not even concerned with what's happening on earth? Certainly in the presence of Jesus, you'd be focused on what Jesus is focused on.

Now this is not insignificant. Wouldn't it matter to you if you understood that these great heroes of the faith who ran their race so well, have handed you the baton as teammates? They're not sitting in the bleachers as critics; they are sitting in the bleachers as cheerleaders, to inspire you, to challenge you, to encourage you, to run this race to the best of your ability. When you fall, they encourage you to get up, get back on your feet—RUN!

I think one of the most painful things that people can experience in this life is the death of a child. Over this past year, there have been several families at Berean who have lost children. It's just such a gut-wrenching pain. But wouldn't it matter to you if you knew that these children who have passed before you are actually in heaven, seated between Abraham and King David, and they're cheering and saying, "Mom, run! Run this race! Don't give up. Don't roll over. Run!" Wouldn't it matter if your child would say, "Run, Dad, run! I know it's hard, but get back on your feet and run! Run this race to win!"

Anxious for the day when you finish your race, you pass the baton and you join them in the bleachers, but in the meantime they are saying, "RUN!" What about a mom or a dad or grandfather, grandmother, a spiritual mentor, a friend, who is already in the presence of Jesus? Wouldn't it matter to you that they are saying, "Run! You've got the baton; you've got to go for it. You've got to give it your best; you've got to run hard." Looking forward to the day when you pass the baton on and join them in the bleachers, but for now they are saying, "Run! Give it your best!" I mean, doesn't that inspire you to run, to take your baton, to run your leg of the race and do the best that you can? It's hard to understand how this metaphor could mean anything but that, as that is the clear and obvious meaning of the metaphor.

He says since that is true, **let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily tangles us**. An **encumbrance** would have been anything that kept them from running at their best. The actual Greek word related to an athlete would have included body weight, so if you're overweight, the idea would be lose the weight—it's an encumbrance—so you can run the race better. It would have included clothing. They didn't run the race with a robe on. As a matter of fact, as strange as it may be to us, the Greek runners ran naked. They lost every item of clothing so as not to be encumbered, so they could run.

It's interesting when Paul is writing to the Galatians, he actually uses this language, and says, "You were running so well. What hindered you?" Answer: Legalism. It was the bondage of legalism that caused them to be encumbered and not run the race well. Whatever it is that encumbers us is not necessarily bad things; it's just not the best things—whatever gets in the way of us running the best race we possibly can.

**The sin that so easily entangles us** is talking about any sin that basically ties us up. Imagine trying to run a marathon with your shoelaces untied or having some rope wrapped around you that keeps falling down around your ankles, and you're trying to manage the rope. That's what sin does to us. Sin makes us selfish. Sin makes us self-focused, where every day that's what we're thinking about. We're not really thinking about the race. We're not really thinking about running well. We're just trying to manage this rope that's all over our legs and ankles, trying not to trip. Think how different it would be if we had a passion for righteousness. We're not tangled up in our sin; we're full speed ahead with a passion for righteousness, seeking to run the absolute best race we can run.

**Let us run with endurance**—it's not a sprint; it's a marathon—**the race that is set before us**. It's very interesting language there and carries the idea that each of us needs to run *our* race. I don't run your race; you don't run my race. We run the race set before us. Now you can wish all day long that your life was different—but it's not different. It is what it is. This is your life. What would it look like to run hard today? What would it look like to run hard tomorrow? What would it look like to run hard the next day? Don't make this more complicated than it needs to be. This is your race. It's possible the runner before me had a hundred miles of flat, grassy parkland, and my leg of the race is a swamp. If that's the case, then run—run your race to the best of your ability!

This was the discussion that Jesus had with Peter in John chapter 21. Jesus has risen from the dead. He meets Peter at the Sea of Galilee, gives Peter a recall back to service, and He tells Peter what kind of race he will run and tells him how he will die. And Peter says, "What about these guys?" And Jesus says, "Peter, it's not your race. It's none of your business. Don't worry about that. You run your race." So, run the race set before you to the best of your ability. Verse 2:

**...fixing our eyes on Jesus,**

It was common for the emperor or people of significance to be seated in boxes at the finish line of the coliseum, so when you came through into the coliseum, you fixed your eyes on the emperor and you ran to the finish line. This is capturing that imagery. *Eyes fixed...focused on Jesus!*

**...the author and perfecter of faith,** (Vs. 2b)

This is language we've had before in the book of Hebrews. **Author** means *pioneer*; it means *trailblazer*. We're not blazing our own trail but we're following Jesus, who has blazed the trail,

who has conquered sin and death once and for all and who has ushered in a better covenant with better promises, with a better hope that leads to a better city. He's the way; we're following Him. He's the trailblazer, the pioneer. The **perfecter** is the *completer*. He's going to complete His promise. He's going to fulfill the promise, and we all, together as teammates, enter in to the new heaven and the new earth...together! It doesn't say the perfecter of *our* faith. If your translation says that, it is incorrect. It is just the **perfecter of faith**, meaning the body of doctrine we believe to be true—everything we've learned in Hebrews that is true. Jesus is the trailblazer; He's the pioneer. He's the one that is going to fulfill His promise and get us to the heavenly city...to the better city. Therefore, we fix our eyes on Him, full speed ahead.

**...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.** (Vs. 2c)

It's not that Jesus found joy in the cross. It's that Jesus found joy in knowing what the cross would provide. God loves His children. His children were lost with no hope. Jesus, in fulfilling the promise, would make a way back, where His children could join Him in the new city forever. So with the joy of knowing what He was about to accomplish, Jesus went to the cross. He **endured the cross, despising the shame**. It's hard for us to imagine just how horrific the cross was in the first century. To us it's just become so much of a religious symbol. But in the first century it was filled with shame. It was a horrific way to die, but not just because of the physical pain. It was because in a shame/honor culture, this last thing would be the most shameful thing you could imagine—with no chance to ever regain honor. And in that culture, that was a horrific thing!

Jesus would face into that, **despising the shame**, but basically saying even though that was true, it wouldn't stop Him. He would endure the cross, and having accomplished the mission, **sat down at the right hand of the throne of God**. We've talked about this many times in Hebrews—indicative of the fact the mission has been accomplished. The work has been done so He was seated at the right hand of God. Verse 3:

**For consider [it's a mathematical term: *calculate, factor*] Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

Basically the idea is: calculate, factor, figure what they did to Jesus as the pioneer, the trailblazer. Therefore, if you're going to follow this trail, you should not be surprised that it will be hard. It will be lonely; it may involve persecution. These first century readers were headed into severe persecution. If they think this is going to be smooth sailing, they're going to get discouraged and give up.

Those last two terms are terms used of runners, **not grow weary** and quit is basically what it says. This goes back to this whole idea that when we trusted Christ as Savior, we did not board a cruise ship. We boarded a battleship. Preachers, people that share the gospel, do people a great disservice when they convince them, "If you come to Christ, it will be smooth sailing. Welcome to the Love Boat!" Because it's devastating when people start shooting; it's devastating when the torpedoes start coming and you think, "What's going on? Why are people shooting at the Love Boat?" The problem is somebody didn't tell you the truth. When you came to Christ, you boarded a battleship. Calculate, factor, figure what happened to Jesus, and realize Jesus said, "They did that to Me; they're going to do that to you." This race isn't easy; it's hard; it's lonely. It can get confusing and painful, but you have to know that the saints of old are gathered in the bleachers of heaven and they

are cheering. They are challenging; they are inspiring. They're not spectators; they are teammates. They ran their race with great courage; they gave it everything they had. They laid down their lives. Many of them died for the cause of Christ. Now they've handed you the baton and they are saying, "Run! Run, don't jog. This isn't the Love Boat. This is the ultimate race of life and you have to take your baton and run like you mean it!"

As we talked about in the Peter series, this is the ultimate battle that ultimately God wins! I don't want to be a spectator. I don't want to be on the bench. I want to be on the field. I want to be beat up; I want to be bloodied. I want to know that I did my part in order to experience the fullness of the victory to come. Those who have gone before us have run courageous races of faith, and now they've passed you the baton and they're saying, "Run! Run! Get back on your feet and run!" Paul says to the Corinthians, "If you're going to run, run to win...if you're going to run, run to win!"

May that be so of us!

*Our Father, it's just hard to imagine how the saints of old would even care about our leg of the race. But God, You care. And in Your presence, they care. They aren't spectators; we are teammates. They want us to run the very best race we can run, until that day when we together enter the new heaven and the new earth. Lord, find us faithful, with all that we have to run our race until it's our turn to pass the baton and to sit with the saints of old and cheer on the next generation of runners. God, may we run to win! In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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March 9/10, 2019

## **Run with Endurance**

*Christ is Enough*

Hebrews 12:1-3

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. What is your view of heaven? What do you base that on?
2. How do other Christians inspire you whether they are those from the past or those still living today?
3. In what ways does a relay race differ from an individual race? What are the benefits and challenges of being part of a relay team?

### **Bible Study**

1. Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Do a quick review of chapter 11, especially verses 39, 40.
2. The “since” in verse 1 refers to what is true that should motivate us in our race. Since we have a cloud of witnesses that surround us. Who are the witnesses? The exact same word is used in 10:28 as eye witnesses. A similar word is used in chapter 11 as witnesses meaning they’re those who give testimony like a martyr. In 12:1 the flavor can be both. They are the witnesses of chapter 11 who are eye witnesses to our leg of the race. The clear imagery is of those who fill the seats in the Roman stadiums cheering on the runners below. Do you think those who have died before us in Christ have some awareness of us on earth and cheer us on? Why or why not?
3. What does it mean to lay aside every encumbrance? What might encumber us in our race today? See Matthew 11:28-30; Galatians 5:7?
4. What are some sins that might entangle us? What have been some sins identified in the book of Hebrews? See chapter 3:12-19.
5. What does it mean to fix our eyes on Jesus? Jesus is far more than just a good example of running the race, but He is an example as well. How does that help us create proper expectations for our race?
6. The writer tells us to run the race “set before us.” See also John 21:15-24. What do we learn from this? Compare the races in Hebrews 11:30-38.

