

Topic: Running Life's Race with Perseverance

Our Gospel and New Testament reading are aimed at helping people handle the harsh realities of life. The text from Luke's Gospel takes place during what is known as "the travel narrative" because, at this point in his ministry, Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem. As he starts moving in this direction, he immediately runs up against opposition and rejection, and some of his followers begin to waver. Those who were aware of the attitudes of the religious leaders in Jerusalem toward Jesus knew that he was heading towards trouble, and they were not so sure they wanted to be with him when the sparks of confrontation began to fly. So to prepare his disciples for the rough road ahead, Jesus told them, ***"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"***¹

The reality of suffering and rejection that Jesus soon faced would disillusion the best of his followers. Only those with spiritual insight could see beyond the humiliation of the cross to see its true meaning. Therefore the fire he came to bring would not result in the warm fuzzy feelings that most people wanted. Indeed, it was far from it. Consequently, to keep his followers from being disillusioned and offended, Jesus did all he could to forewarn them of the division and stress they would soon endure.

Similarly, our New Testament book of Hebrews was written to a people who were so beaten down by troubles, difficulties, and persecutions that they were ready to give up. Therefore the book is aimed at helping people handle and maneuver the brutal realities of life.

¹ Luke 12:49

When most of us come to church, we hunger to hear a word that brings comfort. So today's message can seem perplexing, especially if we are here to find a more profound sense of peace.

But the message we have in our readings today may be more relevant now than ever. Many contemporary pastors believe that *“There may never have been a culture with a lower pain threshold than ours. Additionally, there has never been a culture that has provided fewer resources for life and death than ours.”*² So the book of Hebrews is a needed antidote. It draws from people who have gone before us who have endured triumphantly over the most difficult of circumstances. But through faith, they *“conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises.”*³ Furthermore, these saints are now in the heavenly grandstand looking down on us. Our lesson today, therefore, declares, *“since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”*⁴ The image the writer uses of running a race is very instructive. The word for **“race”** in Greek is *agón* (*agōna*). We get our English word agony from this word. The word was used to describe a highbred of wrestling and boxing match where the combatants used a kind of rugged leather that protected their hands but also brought out blood when used against one's opponent. The word was also used as a metaphor describing the difficulty of a pentathlon, where running, jumping, disks, javelin, and this highbred of a wrestling/boxing match occurred. The strenuous endurance required for such an

² Tim Keller, “The Runner,” Sermon April 10, 2005 on Hebrews 12:1-3, quote has been partially paraphrased

³ Hebrews 11:33

⁴ Hebrews 12:1

event required strict training and concentration of purpose. This ***“race marked out for us”***⁵ is an agonizing ordeal.

I share these things not to discourage you. But to let you know that if you are struggling, you are not alone.

This past week I had two people share with me the struggles they have endured in the ministry. One, who served as a missionary to Muslim people, received death threats, with his picture posted on their wanted signs. As I shared my own difficulties with them (which seemed small in comparison), we found our hearts being drawn with a deeper bond to each other. And it let me know that I am not alone in my struggles.

The Psalmist once said, ***“It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”***⁶ There is something about affliction that drove me closer to the Lord. It created in me a hunger for God’s strength. Therefore stress is a part of God’s training so that I might not “grow weary and lose heart,”⁷

George MacDonald said, “Everything difficult points to something more than our theory of life yet embraces.”⁸ He implies that if grief comes into your life and you meltdown or freak out, it is because your worldview of life is inadequate.

For example, on the one hand, we are not called to be stoic by acting like difficulties don’t affect us. But, on the other hand, we are not to lose heart. The fire that Jesus came to bring does not come to destroy but to refine and purify. It comes to bring us wholeness. So let us run with perseverance the race set before us.

The book of Hebrews offers such encouragement by giving both positive and negative examples in salvation history. In

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Psalm 119:71

⁷ Hebrews 12:3

⁸ George MacDonald. From the sermon “The Word Of Jesus On Prayer” from Unspoken Sermons.

chapter 4, we read: ***“Let us strive and make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.”***⁹ In chapter 6, ***“And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end so that you may not be sluggish.”***¹⁰ In chapter 10, ***“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.”***¹¹ In chapter 12, ***“Furthermore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.”***¹²

Now is our time. Now is our turn – all these veterans of faith are looking down at us to see if we, too, will finish the race God has put before us.

SO LET’S FINISH OUR RACE. Now is our moment to show everyone what we are made of! As the words of our opening hymn exhort:

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

“When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.”¹³

So let each of us run the race so that we might finish well and receive the heavenly prize that awaits those who persevere.

⁹ Hebrews 4:11

¹⁰ Hebrews 6:11-12

¹¹ Hebrews 10:35

¹² Hebrews 12:12

¹³ Hymn 636, How firm a foundation, Church Hymnal 1982