

Running the Race

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Date: 14 July 2024

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[0 : 00] Well, if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling this morning, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. Hebrews chapter 12. Hebrews chapter 12.

Page 1008 in the Church Bible. Hebrews chapter 12. I'm reading from the beginning.

Therefore, 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, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

But particularly the words, run with endurance the race that is set before us. Run with endurance the race that is set before us.

[1 : 20] Now, as you know, so far, the summer, our summer hasn't been the best in terms of weather, because of all the wind and all the rain.

And I think all of us, we're all looking and we're all longing for some sunshine. But even though the summer hasn't been good for sun, it has been good for sport.

Because as you know, our summer of sport, it started in June with a month of football at Euro 2024 in Germany. And although our home nation wasn't very successful, it has been good to watch all the teams of the tournament take to the field.

And now, as you know, Euro 2024, it comes to its climax and its conclusion tonight with the final between Spain and England. Well, then there's Wimbledon, that annual tennis tournament of strawberries and cream.

Because Wimbledon, it's, well, it's actually the only time of year that I ever watch tennis. And I actually didn't realize that the world number one player, he has a name that highlights our number one problem in the world.

[2 : 29] Because with a name like Yannick Sinner, Yannick Sinner, he's a constant reminder, I think he is anyway, of our need for salvation. He even makes for interesting commentary.

When you hear one of the commentators, he was saying that in a match that Sinner, a match that he won, not the one that he lost. But when he won a match, they said Sinner found salvation. Sinner found salvation. And so Wimbledon also, it's reaching its climax and its conclusion today with the men's final. But it won't be with Sinner, because Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz are in the final.

But, you know, our summer of sport had set to continue with the Olympics in Paris just around the corner. And, of course, the Olympics, they've been around for over 2,000 years, with the first Olympic Games believed to have been held.

I couldn't believe this when I looked it up. 776 BC was held in Greece. And they were held in Greece in name of the Greek god Zeus, who rules as the king of the gods on Mount Olympus.

[3 : 31] But in 393 AD, the Roman emperor Theodosius, he was a Christian. He actually banned the Olympic Games. He banned the Olympic Games claiming that they were, they encouraged paganism.

And the ban remained in place for over 1,500 years, until the Olympic Games were revived in 1896. And back then, there were only 43 events in nine different sports.

And at the turn of the 20th century, Paris hosted the second Olympic Games in 1900, which saw women compete for the very first time. And as you know, this year's Olympics are being held in Paris again.

But this time, there are 363 medal events in 45 sports, with one of the newest sports being breakdancing.

That's one of the newest sports in the competition. I don't know who's entering that one. But for many Christians, this year's Olympics in Paris, they mark a special centenary anniversary.

[4 : 36] Because as you know, it's 100 years since the Scottish Christian missionary, Eric Little, won gold at the 400-meter race in 1924.

And to mark this special centenary anniversary, the Launther and Stornoway, they're showing the Oscar-winning film, Chariots of Fire, on Saturday, the 26th of July, at 6 p.m.

And you can book your tickets through the link that's on the notices, or you can phone the box office. Maybe you've seen the film before. But they're showing it to mark the occasion, the centenary occasion of Eric Little's win.

I know that's a theme I want us to think about this morning. As I said, I want us to think about the theme of running the race. The theme of running the race. And I want us to think about it under three very simple headings.

The runners, the race, and the wreath. The runners, the race, and the wreath. And you'll know that if you're good with English, which I'm not very good at, you'll know that the last point isn't really an R at all.

[5 : 37] So the runners, the race, and the wreath. First of all, the runners. We read there in verse 1, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, it has also laid aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and it has run with endurance the race that is set before us.

You may know that the purpose of the letter to the Hebrews, and boys and girls, I just forgot that I didn't give you any of the questions, but you'll know the answers as you listen, okay?

So listen very carefully. The purpose of the letter to the Hebrews is to present and to portray to us the message that Jesus is better. Jesus is better.

But for the original audience, the author sought to exhort and to encourage the Hebrews to personally and to patiently persevere in their faith, even in the face of persecution.

Because the Hebrews, they were Jewish converts to Christianity. They had been brought up with the religion and the rituals of all the Old Testament sacrifices.

[6 : 43] But when it came to Jesus, when they came to see Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and the Savior of sinners, these Hebrews, they came to Christ.

They came to salvation. They came to a knowledge of the truth. They came to faith in Christ and committed their life to Jesus Christ. But with that commitment came persecution.

With the Hebrews, they were persecuted for their faith to the point that they were ostracized and became outcasts in their community. Many of them had their homes burned or their property stolen.

They received insults and imprisonment. And it was just because they were Christians. Just because they were Christians. But, you know, the pressure and the persecution was so severe upon them and such a strain in their lives that many of the Hebrews, they were becoming weary and even worn out.

So much so that they were dropping out of going to church services. They were dwindling in their faith. And they'd stopped growing in grace. And they wanted to give up altogether.

[7 : 50] These Christians, they were really flat. Some, you could say, they even returned to their old rituals and religion of Judaism. But the letter to the Hebrews was written to encourage and to exhort persecuted Christians to patiently persevere in their faith.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to exhort and encourage persecuted Christians to patiently persevere in their faith. And, you know, we need this letter too. Because although you could say it's relatively easy and effortless in the Isle of Lewis to come out on the side of Christ and commit your life to following Christianity, that's not the case across the water.

Or even for the rest of the whole of the UK. Because as a whole, it's getting much, much harder to become a Christian. I think in the past, I was listening to a sermon yesterday and he was saying, in the past, it was a shame.

It was seen as shame if you didn't go to church. Nowadays, it's seen as shame if you even acknowledge Christianity at all. That's how much it's changed.

And that's only in about 40, 50 years. And so we need this letter too. We need to be encouraged and exhorted to patiently persevere in our faith.

[9 : 10] Now, some would say that this letter, the letter to the Hebrews, it was written by an anonymous author. But, I don't know, the more I study it, the more I look at it, I would say that it's probably written by the Apostle Paul.

And that the only reason this letter remained anonymous and not attributed to Paul like all the other letters are, was because, well, I was thinking, if people were found to have this letter in their home, and that they saw that it was from the Apostle Paul, they would be persecuted and even punished more severely for it.

Any association to the Apostle Paul, who had been converted from Judaism to Christianity, that would have caused more persecution, more punishment. Another reason I believe that Paul wrote this letter is because, you know, out of all the New Testament writers, no one understood the rituals and the religion of the Old Testament Judaism quite like the Apostle Paul.

Because, as Paul claimed and as Paul confessed prior to his own conversion in Philippians chapter 3, he says there that he was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. As to the law, he said, I was a Pharisee. As to zeal, I was a persecutor of the church. And as to the righteousness under the law, I was blameless. You know, if anyone knew what these persecuted Christians were going through, it would have been Paul.

[10 : 34] Because Paul was someone who put Christians through it. Before Paul was converted to Christianity and became a preacher of the gospel, he put many Christians through punishment, he put them in prison, and he ensured that they were persecuted for their faith.

Paul was someone who formerly and fiercely persecuted the church. Which is why Paul, you could say, carefully and cleverly wrote this beautiful letter in such a way that when you read it, he carefully considers all these Old Testament types and shadows.

And with each and every one of them, he says throughout his whole letter, he says to us that Jesus is better. Jesus is better. Jesus is better. And when you read through the letter, and I'd encourage you to read it, it's not very long you can spend your afternoon reading through the letter to the Hebrews.

Because in this letter, Paul tells us, he starts right at the beginning, and he says to us that Jesus is better than the prophets. He's better than the angels. He's better than Moses.

He gives to us a better Sabbath rest. Jesus, he says, is a better high priest than Aaron was. Jesus assures us of a better covenant promise.

[11 : 48] He gives to us a better sanctuary for worship. He's a better sacrifice than all the bulls and goats that were offered throughout the whole of the Old Testament. My friend, Jesus is better.

That's the message of the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is better. But before Paul comes to the climax and culmination of his letter in chapter 12, Paul reminds us, and he reassures us in chapter 11, that in the Christian life, we are not individuals isolated from one another.

In the Christian life, we're not individuals isolated from one another. Because the message he wants to tell us is that we're in this together. We are in this together.

Which is why Hebrews chapter 11, it sets before us this long list of men and women in the Old Testament who patiently persevered in their faith. And we read about them.

We read that they all walked by faith. By faith Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and Joshua, and Rahab, and Gideon, and Barak, and Samson, and Samuel, and David.

[12 : 59] Paul describes all of them here as this cloud of witnesses. They're all this cloud of witnesses watching in the stand because by faith they patiently persevered in faith.

They walked by faith. They died in faith. And they all testified to the truth that Jesus is better. Jesus is better. And so in true form and fashion, Paul then begins chapter 12, and he pens that word, therefore.

Paul loves the word, therefore. Therefore, 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.

And you know what Paul emphasizes and explains to us here is the plural of Christianity. And I hope we don't miss this.

The plural of Christianity. Read verse 1 again. He says, It's the plural of Christianity.

[14 : 28] That as the people of God, as the church of Jesus Christ, as the body of Christ, as Christians, we're not to be insular and isolated individuals that run for our own gain and our own

glory.

No, we're to be runners in this race together. We're to be runners in this race together. We're not to be out in front leaving the pack behind us.

We're to run this race together. Because as runners in this race, we need one another. We need one another. And that's what Paul wanted to remind it. Remind these persecuted Christians.

We need one another. We need to spur one another on. We need to support one another. We need to strengthen one another. And you know, as a Christian, Paul was big on this.

Because Paul spent years, as you know, isolated. An isolated individual, persecuted and in prison for preaching the gospel. Which is why he stresses the plural of Christianity.

[15:31] That's why he stresses the one another of the church. Because throughout his letters, Paul says, Please, speak to one another. Serve with one another.

Be at peace with one another. Build one another up. Bear one another's burdens. Be kind to one another. Embrace one another. Encourage one another.

Care for one another. Comfort one another. And as you know, there's one one another that the Bible repeatedly mentions throughout. Love one another. Love one another.

And Jesus tells us, Love one another as I have loved you. Love one another as I have loved you. Therefore, as runners in this race, we're not to run out front.

We're not to run for our own glory and our own gain. No, we're to run together. We're to run with one another for the glory of God. We're to run with one another for the glory of God.

[16:33] And you know, that was the thing about Eric Little. Eric Little never ran for his own gain or his own glory. He ran for the glory of God.

In fact, Eric Little said, God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. God made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. My friend, we are to run this race together. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. So we see, first of all, the runners. Then secondly, the race. The runners and the race.

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith. Maybe for you, maybe for you, the thought of running is tiring enough.

[17:36] You know, when I was young, I hated running. Absolutely hated running. But after swapping the act of life, of being a sparky, to sitting at a desk most of the day, both my waist and my weight increased.

I was tired. Alison would probably say I was grumpy. And my clothes were all getting tight. And that was until I committed to doing a couch to 5K. And so if you want a smaller waist or to carry less weight, I'd encourage you to do a couch to 5K or start walking or do some exercise.

Because as our Bible tells us and teaches us, it says that we're not only to care for our soul, we're also to care for our temple. We're to take care of our temple because our body is a temple that we need to take care of.

In fact, Paul mentioned to another young minister. It's amazing he mentioned it to a young minister. I took it to heart. He mentioned to Timothy that bodily exercise is of some value. Bodily exercise is of some value because, as you know, exercise, it's good for us.

It's good for our physical health. It's good for our mental health. It's a known fact that at any age, the more exercise we do, the more energy we will have. If we don't exercise, we won't have energy.

[18:53] And when we don't have energy, we become lazy and lethargic. We become low in our mood and low in our mind. And so in order to take care of our temple, we need to make sure that we're doing some form of exercise.

You know, just before Matthew was born, so Matthew, he's our eight-month-old son, and before he was born in October, I was training for the Westside 10K, believe it or not.

Every Saturday morning, though, I would have to drag myself out of bed, and I won't name him, but Ali and I, we would go for a run. And it's safe to say that when it comes to an ex-Sparky and an ex-serviceman running together, there's no comparison, really.

Ali is a machine. He's super fit. I'm super flabby. But Ali was patient. He was good at setting the pace as we ran together. And as time went on and our training continued, I ran slightly faster.

He always ran even further. Now, I'm not saying that I'll ever be Usain Bolt, the fastest man on earth, because he was someone who trained for three hours a day, six days a week, and 11 months of the year.

[20 : 04] But what I am saying is that training is important, because you can't just turn up at a race and run. Training is important.

Remember Rico Tice saying in Christianity Explored, for those of you who did Christianity Explored, you might remember, he said, we've got to find out the truth about ourselves on the training ground before the real questions are asked during a proper race.

We need to find out the truth about ourselves on the training ground before the real questions are asked during a proper race. And, you know, that's why Paul often compared the Christian life, boys and girls, he compared the Christian life to using the illustration, using the illustration of an athlete running in a race.

And either he used the illustration because he watched athletics or he was an athlete himself or he liked running. But Paul, he often speaks about the importance of spending time toiling and training in the godly gym.

Paul often spoke about the importance of spending time toiling and training in the godly gym. When he wrote to the Corinthians, Paul said, I don't run aimlessly, but I discipline my body and keep it under control.

[21 : 20] I don't run aimlessly, I discipline my body and I keep it under control. Because for Paul, he said, the Christian life requires toil and training in the godly gym.

It requires discipline and devotion to Jesus Christ as the author and finisher of our faith. For Paul, the Christian life requires energy and effort in our exercise of the means of grace.

And when we talk about the means of grace, my good friend J.C. Reilly always said before us five things. The means of grace, private Bible reading. We need to exercise ourselves in that.

Have energy for that. Private and public prayer. Public worships. We're coming to church on the Lord's Day. Protecting the Sabbath. Seeking to remember the Sabbath.

Because it's a holy day. And partaking of the Lord's Supper. They're the means of grace. We're to exercise ourselves in the means of grace. And for Paul, he emphasizes that the Christian life, it requires toil and training.

[22 : 23] It requires discipline and devotion. It requires energy and effort in our exercise of the means of grace. Because, my friend, to run the race, this Christian race, it requires our discipline, our devotion, our desire to be spiritually fit and focused rather than spiritually fat and flabby.

To run the race, the Christian life, requires us to be disciplined, devoted, and to have this desire to be spiritually fit and focused rather than spiritually fat and flabby.

And you know, the danger for a Christian to be spiritually fat and flabby, what do I mean by that? It's when you're a hearer of God's Word, but not a doer.

Someone who's spiritually fat and flabby is someone who gets lots of information, but in their life there is no application. Someone who's spiritually fat and flabby is consumed with serving self rather than committed to serving their Savior.

My friend, to run the race, the Christian life requires toil and training, it requires energy and exercise, it requires our discipline, our devotion, our desire to be spiritually fit and spiritually focused.

[23 : 50] And you know, that could certainly be said about Eric Little because as you know, when he discovered that the heats of the 100 meter sprint at the 1924 Paris Olympics were going to be held on the Lord's Day, as a Christian with conviction, Eric Little refused to run.

As a Christian with conviction, he refused to run. And you know, sadly, I do find it so sad that many Christians today, they have no issue, no issue playing sport or watching sport on the Lord's Day. And yet, it's the Lord's Day. We call it the Lord's Day because it's His Day. And surely, we can give to the Lord the Lord's Day.

But you know, the reason Eric Little refused to run on the Lord's Day wasn't because he was physically fit and physically focused. It was because he was spiritually fit and spiritually focused. And you know, as you know, Eric Little, he changed to compete in the 400 meter race, which was on a weekday. It was a race that he won. He won gold. And it said that on the day of the race, he was handed a folded piece of paper, which read, it's amazing what it read.

[25 : 04] In the old book, it says, he that honors me, I will honor, wishing you the best of success, always. Eric Little, he recognized that it was a reference to 1 Samuel 2, verse 30, which encouraged him to run the race with endurance.

And after he won gold, Eric Little, he mentioned to the media, and this is what he said, the secret of my success over the 400 meters is that I run the first 200 meters as fast as I can.

Then for the second 200 meters, with God's help, I run faster. Do you know, it's a reminder to us, he that honors me, I will honor.

He that honors me, I will honor. And so we see the runners, the race, and then lastly, time is going, the wreath. The wreath.

Therefore, 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, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endure the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

[26 : 25] Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

As we said, Paul, he often used the illustration of an athlete running in a race. One occasion was when he asked the question, he said, do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize?

So run, he says, run that you may obtain the prize. Run that you may obtain it, but every athlete, he says, receives a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable wreath.

And that's the point, that's the purpose of encouraging us to run the Christian race with endurance.

Because we're to lay aside, he says, and we're to look. We're to lay aside and we are to look.

We're to lay aside every weight, every sin which clings so closely and so easily besets us, these things that get in our way from running the Christian race, and we're to look.

[27 : 34] So we're to lay aside and we're to look. And we're to look not to the left hand, not to the right hand, but straight ahead. We're to lift our eyes upwards and focus and fixate ourselves upon Jesus.

He's the only one we can look to. We're to look to Jesus and know him and love him and follow him as the author and the finisher of our faith. And you know, my friend, whatever we go through while running in this Christian race, whatever bumps and scrapes we find on the road, whatever potholes and puddles that we encounter, and however tired and however torn we feel and however worn out and however weighed down we become, we need to do what we've been encouraged and exhorted to do here.

We need to consider the cloud of witnesses running alongside us. We need to remember that we need one another, have one another. But we also need to lay aside.

We need to lay aside these sins that so easily beset us and look. Lay aside and look. Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus. Why?

We've been told Jesus is better. Whatever you think is better in this life, Jesus is better. You need to lay aside and look to Jesus because Jesus is better.

[29 : 01] And you know, for Eric Liddell, he said that his greatest achievement wasn't winning gold at the Paris Olympics in 1924.

His greatest achievement was serving his savior on the mission field, boys and girls, in China.

Because in 1925, Eric Liddell returned to China, to the country of his birth, to follow in the footsteps of his parents.

He was there as a missionary. And of course, Eric Liddell, he saw that every Christian has a role and every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith wherever they are in the world, whether in China or in Barvis.

Eric Liddell said, we are all missionaries. Wherever we go, we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ. We're all missionaries.

Wherever we go, we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ. And Eric Liddell, as you know, he remained a missionary in China until he died.

[30 : 07] He died of a brain tumor. He was in a prison in 1945. He died at the age of only 43. But you know, for Eric Liddell, he lived life with an eternal perspective.

He lived life with an eternal perspective because it was never about how we start the race. It was always about how we finish the race. And you know, that's what we're being reminded this morning.

We all need to start the race. My unconverted friend, you all know that you need to start this Christian race. But we need to finish it too. And we need to finish well.

We need to finish strong. We need to finish still looking, still longing to see Jesus face to face. We need to finish looking to this Jesus, knowing him and loving him and following him as the author and the finisher of our faith.

My friend, we need to run the race in order that we may receive an imperishable wreath, an imperishable crown. Because the beautiful thing about our Bible is that when we receive that imperishable crown, we will cast our crown before the throne and acknowledge that he is worthy. [31 : 26] He is worthy of all glory, power, honor, and dominion. But you know, my final word is from Eric Little.

I'll give it to him. He said to his unconverted friend, so my unconverted friend, listen, many of us, he says, are missing something in life because we are after the second best.

I put before you what I have found to be the best, one who is worthy of all our devotion, Jesus Christ. He is the Savior for the young and for the old.

my friend, my friend, if you feel that you're missing something in life, don't seek the second best because Jesus, he is best.

And as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, he is better. Jesus is better. But may the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray.

[32 : 29] Our Father in heaven, help us, we pray, to begin this race if we have not yet begun it, to go to the starting line and to take that first step and to know that when we take that first step, Jesus is with us every step of the way.

Help us, Lord, as those who are running this race, to keep looking to Jesus, that we may feel tired, we may feel torn by many distractions, we may feel weighed down by our sin that so easily besets us, but help us, Lord, to lay aside these sins and keep looking, to keep looking to Jesus, to know that he is better and that it is, as the psalmist says, it is better to be in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of sin.

And Lord, help us then, we ask, to keep looking to this Savior who loved us and gave himself for us. Go before us, we pray, cleanse us, we ask, for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen. Well, we're going to bring our service to a conclusion this morning. We're going to sing again from Psalm 119, but this time in the Sing Psalms version.

Psalm 119, we're singing from verse 27, so it's on page 158 of the Blue Psalm book. Psalm 119, singing in verse 27 down to the verse marked 32.

[34 : 08] But before we sing, and I should have done this before I started preaching, we have questions, so some of you were handed your clipboards on the way in.

I didn't go through the questions, but I'm sure you can read them yourself. Okay, so we'll go through the questions. Are you ready? Yeah. Question one, what problem were the Christians in the first century facing?

Persecution. Okay, well done. Question two, what is the message of the letter to the Hebrews? Is it forgive one another, keep going, or Jesus is better? Good job.

Question three, which sport does the Apostle Paul often use as an illustration? Is it tennis, athletics, or basketball? Athletics. Well done. Question four, in what country did Eric Liddell serve the Lord as a missionary?

China. Yeah, so it wasn't Chile and it wasn't Costa Rica. It was China. Well done. Good job. Are you good at listening? I think if we tested the adults, do you think they would get as many right?

[35 : 17] No. Okay, so we're going to sing Psalm 119, page 158, verse 27. Instruct me in your precepts way.

I'll think upon your works at length. My soul with sorrow is worn out. According to your word, give strength. Be gracious to me through your law. From lying ways, keep me apart.

I choose to take the way of truth. I keep your laws with all my heart. I cling to your decrees, O Lord. Do not let shame take hold of me. I run the way of your commands because my heart you have set free.

So we'll sing these verses of Psalm 119 and we'll stand to sing, if you're able, to God's praise.

Instruct me in your precepts way.

I'll think upon your works at length. My soul with sorrow is born out.

[36 : 33] According to your word, yes, be gracious to me through.

I choose to take the way of truth.

I keep your laws with all my heart.

I cling to your decrees, O Lord.

Do not let shame take hold of me. I want the way of your commands.

[38 : 00] Because my heart you have set free. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.