

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS WHO FINISH THE RACE Hebrews 12:1-4

Please review this week's catechism question and pray for your missionaries.

INTRODUCTION

A. The metaphor the author uses to encourage these Christians is that of a marathon foot race. What makes finishing a marathon (26.2 miles) so difficult?

B. What kinds of things besides persecution (which was the difficulty facing the recipients of this letter) can make finishing the “Christian race” so difficult?

I've met many formerly devout Christians over the years that have dropped out because of one too many disappointing relationships with other Christians. They don't go to church anymore, they say, because they just can't take the hypocrisy any more. Others are tempted to quit due to chronic physical or emotional pain. They simply cannot pretend to trust a god who does nothing to relieve their suffering. Others drop out because the rewards for obedience seem so minimal. This is especially true for those who are trying to be a faithful parent or spouse or active church member and there just does not seem to be any positive feedback or outcome in spite of faithful parenting or loving of a spouse or work in a church. Others withdraw from running in the Christian marathon because they are tired of failure. They don't want to be angry or filled with lust or full of worry and they ask God to take it away and they try to resist but they are weekly or daily faced with failure to do what they know they ought to do and not do what they know they should not do. So they simply stop, throw up their hands and say, “what's the use, I'll never get better.” For still others the allurements of sin or of living a comfortable life in the U.S. are simply too great to resist. Living for momentary, short term pleasure which is so readily available to us is simply too easy and living for the long term pleasure of knowing God and going to heaven

is just so vague and uncertain that we give in to food or shopping or sex or alcohol or vacations at the cottage or a perfect house or hunting or whatever titillating pleasure you prefer.

C. What sorts of things most often make you weary and cause you to think about quitting the Christian race?

This passage is a word of encouragement for weary runners. If you have ever felt weary of being a Christian; of being a faithful parent or spouse or friend; of fighting against sin; of denying yourself earthly pleasures so you can pursue a heavenly goal; this passage is for you.

STUDY

1. Who is the cloud of witnesses that “surround us”?

First of all, these witnesses are primarily all the people mentioned or alluded to in chapter 11. All of those people to whom God witnessed as having lived by faith by recording their stories in the OT are the primary people to whom the author is referring; beginning with Able and coming all the way to the last of the prophets, Malachi. All of these people have finished the race by faith and are now sitting in the stands so to speak, waiting for us to finish the race.

2. To what are they “witnesses”? Clue: the verbal form of this noun has been used in Hebrews at: 7:8 (declared), 17 (declared), 10:15 (testifies), 11:2, 4, 5, 39. In chapter 11 they are all translated “commended” by the NIV.

The verb has been used throughout the letter to describe the things and the people that God “bears witness to” in the Bible. Therefore, they are not present to watch us but to bear testimony to the fact that the reward of living with God forever is worth whatever cost we may incur in obtaining it. The author's point is that we ought to remember, to think about this great company of men and women whose stories are recorded in the Bible and in the pages of church history who lived by faith in the promises of God and thus successfully finished the race.

3. Have you ever been helped by remembering the faithfulness of another Christian, either dead or living? How does it help to think about others who have successfully finished the race?

4. What in particular are we to emulate as we think about this great crowd of witnesses? (The second clause in v. 1 literally says, "...also throwing off everything that hinders, that is, the sin that so easily entangles...")

Just as they laid aside every weight, that is, the entanglements of sin and ran with endurance, so should we. The word picture is easy to understand. Just as a runner strips down to the bare essentials so that nothing hinders his running, so should we get rid of every hindrance to running. In other words, your sin is the only thing that can stop you. Other people can't stop you. Sickness and accidents and poverty can't stop you. The only thing that can stop you from finishing the race is you, your sin, your refusal to obey God and do what he wants you to do. This is such good news. Your disobedient child cannot stop you from being a Christian and going to heaven. Your chronic illness cannot stop you. Your dead end job cannot hinder you from being a follower of Christ. The only thing that can stop you, is you. You cannot always get the perfect life you dreamed of here on planet earth but you can always live like a Christian and go to heaven. If the point of your life is finishing the race as a Christian then you are never in a hopeless situation. All you have to do is get rid of your sins, which are your strategies to find happiness apart from God.

5. Consider David fighting Goliath and fleeing Saul in the desert. How did he throw off entangling sin and run the race with endurance?

Let's just remember David, the boy that by faith killed Goliath thus putting the entire Philistine army to flight and by faith escaped being killed by the sword of Saul. He ran the race by setting aside sin. He refused to be intimidated by Goliath or to be turned aside by his brothers or King Saul. He threw aside fear and trusted God to kill Goliath. Then, he refused to sin by killing Saul when he had the chance. He didn't turn to worshipping idols when being chased through the desert and finally having to take refuge in a Philistine city.

He didn't turn away from God because of his suffering. He laid aside sin, running the race by faith.

6. How does David's sin of adultery and murder in the episode with Bathsheba relate to his throwing off sin and running with endurance?

God bore witness to David's sin of adultery and murder. But then he also shows us David's repentance from sin and faith in God, his savior by recording David's prayer of repentance and faith, which is Psalm 51. He then shows how he lived by faith, laying aside sin as he lived with the consequences of his adultery and murder. Laying aside sin does not mean being perfect but it does mean recognizing sin as your enemy. We realize, as John Owen said, "Either be killing sin or sin will be killing you." We kill sin, we lay it aside, both by avoiding it by faith and by repenting of it by faith.

Weary runners will find strength to endure by remembering those who went before.

7. What does the phrase, "...the race set before us" mean?

The race course that you must run is laid out for you by God himself. While every course of every Christian has similarities, no two courses are identical. The course God laid out for Abraham was different than the one he laid out for Samson, which was different from the one he laid out for Isaiah. More than a few people have quit running because they didn't like the course God set before them in comparison to some other Christian's course. You are not in charge of the length or level of difficulty of your course or of any one else's course. God sovereignly and specifically sets out the course he wants you to run. He is perfect in his knowledge and wisdom and goodness and love. The race we are in is more like a steeplechase than a simple marathon. There are obstacles placed along the way by the hand of our merciful and loving Father. Our task is not to understand why our course has a particular obstacle and someone else's course does not. Our task is to run with endurance along the course God has laid out for us.

8. How does knowing that God himself has set out your "race course" help you to keep running?

This has been such a helpful thing to know in my Christian life. It has been helpful as I have been confronted by various difficulties to remember that this difficulty has specifically been placed here by my Father and so I don't need to be afraid. I can live by faith through this because God never places an obstacle on the trail that is intended to destroy me. Rather every obstacle is there for me to learn more deeply that he is sufficient. Anything that shows me my weakness is a good thing because then I must rely on his strength. This has also helped me to not be jealous of others who have it "easier" than I do at the moment or to lose hope when confronted with far greater difficulties than others. Also, knowing that God sets out the course for every Christian helps us to help others. One of the things that inhibits our ability to help others is that sense of hopelessness when we see the severity of another's problems. Yet if we know that God put the problem there so they can live by faith through it, then I can help because my goal isn't to fix the problem but to help the person live by faith in the midst of the problem. If I thought I had to fix everyone's problems I would quit being a pastor. My job and your job is to help others live by faith in the course that God has set for them, not to give them a different course.

Weary runners will find strength to endure by remembering God has laid out the course.

9. According to v. 2 how is it that we are to run the race with endurance? How does this relate to the metaphor?

We are enabled to run with endurance the race set before us by looking to, paying attention to Jesus. You will never finish the race if you only look at merely human examples. You will not finish the race if you pay attention to yourself. The only way to run with endurance and thus to finish is by looking to Jesus. The verb that is translated "let us fix our eyes on" in the NIV and "Looking to" in the ESV and "looking unto" in the NKJV is a rare compound word that contains the idea of looking away from one thing in order to look at another thing. In other words, our attention is fixed on one object and ignores all other objects. This is exactly what a runner must do. If you run looking around at the scenery or the other runners you are going to

stumble and fall. You must keep your attention focused on what lies ahead and those who are ahead. Ultimately you must keep your attention fixed on the finish line and the reward that awaits you. In addition the tense of the verb is in the present tense which means this is something we are to do all the time. The only way to keep on running is to keep on looking at Jesus only.

10. According to v. 2 why is it so necessary to "fix our eyes on Jesus?"

The first thing we are told is that he is the author and perfecter of our faith. This means two things. First, Jesus lived his life from beginning to end by faith. He began his life by faith and he came to the end of his life by faith. Therefore, he is the best example of a life lived by faith. The second thing this phrase means is that Jesus is the one who secures all the promises of God for us. He is the one who provides for us all God has promised to give. He is the originator of salvation and he is the one who completes the work of salvation. This has been a major theme in this letter. Jesus is our high priest and our sacrifice and our mediator. By his life, death, resurrection and present intercession he has obtained for all who trust in him all the blessings of heaven. He makes us fit for heaven and he makes sure we make it to heaven. We must, every day fix our eyes on Jesus as the one who has written and bought our ticket and will make sure that the train makes it safely to our heavenly home.

11. What are you most tempted to fix your eyes on instead of Jesus? How does this affect your running the race with endurance?

You do not fix your eyes on what you are doing or not doing but on what Christ has done and is doing and will do. In my own experience and in the experience of many I counsel this is a major problem. We spend too much time fixing our attention on our own experience and performance and so we either grow self satisfied or despair. Jesus is the only one who can enable you to run and make sure that you do not stumble but make it safely to the end of the race.

12. How did Jesus become the "author and perfecter of our faith"?

It was by enduring the cross that Jesus both exemplifies faith and becomes the object of our faith. His death on that Roman cross is both the highest example of a human trusting God's promises and it is also the means by which Jesus becomes our mediator, the one who guarantees for us all the blessings of God.

13. What is the joy that was set before Jesus that enabled him to endure the cross? See John 17:1-5.

Jesus knew that the cross was the only way that he could obtain maximum joy. He knew that the only way he could be finally and fully happy was if he willingly went to that bloody cross. What is the joy that Jesus died to obtain? The idea fits very well into the metaphor of a race. Why do runners run the race? They run for the joy of finishing and winning and the celebration that follows. What is the joy that Jesus anticipated? It was the joy of obtaining the salvation of all God's people so that the Father was glorified in a maximum way. Jesus lived in the joyful anticipation of saving all the people his Father gave to him so that he would be glorified as a great savior for sinners and his father would be glorified as the greatest and best of all beings. The only way for the Father to be viewed and admired as both a just and loving God was for Jesus to die. The only way for the son to be viewed and admired as a submissive son and a loving savior was for him to die. The only way for all those who trust in Christ to be forgiven and brought to live with the Father in heaven forever was for the son to die. Therefore, in order to obtain maximum joy the Son of God died on that cross.

14. What does it mean to say he despised the shame?

First, the shame he despised is the humiliation of being the only perfect person to ever live on this planet and yet to be treated as if he was the worst sort of criminal in such a public way. He was the object of human hatred and criticism and judgment and cruelty and yet he was the only one who ever deserved love and loyalty. He was treated the way our culture treats pedophiles and serial murderers. He thought it nothing to be treated like dirt in light of the joy set before him. In addition, the shame he despised was the shame of being treated as God's enemy. This word "shame" is most often associated

with God's judgment of his enemies in the OT. God repeatedly says that he is going to bring shame upon the disobedient. So it was not only the shame of being treated like the worst sort of criminal by humans but that he was treated as the worst sort of sinner by God himself on that cross. This is the shame that he despised. This means he did not think it anything to be treated so badly by God and man because he knew what waited on the other side of the cross. This is simply one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible. Jesus paid no attention to the shame in view of joy.

15. According to vv. 3-4 we are to pay attention to Jesus' suffering. How is thinking about his suffering supposed to help us?

We need to compare what he endured to what we are enduring and realize that we have suffered nothing compared to him and so we can bear up, we can endure. This is not the kind of encouragement that our therapeutic culture would recommend giving to people who are suffering. What the author is saying is that what you and I are suffering is very little compared to him and so quit your whining and keep living by faith. The idea here is this: if Jesus, the perfect and eternal Son of God suffered as he did then how can you expect to not suffer at all? You are the follower of a crucified savior and so you should expect to suffer and any suffering you endure will not even come close to his suffering.

16. What are some ways the "joy set before you" is enabling you to suffer loss and thus keep running the race with endurance?

Weary runners will find strength to endure by remembering Jesus finished.