

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
September 16, 2012

Eyes on the Prize

Read Hebrews 12:1-11

Key verses: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The Christian life is a race. And we each have an assigned course. How we *start* that race is important, but most important is how we *finish!*

The image described here is of a great Roman amphitheater, the stands filled with spectators watching and cheering for the athletes competing on the track.

“We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (v. 1a). In its immediate context, the “great cloud of witnesses” refers to the great hall of faith described in chapter 11. It includes Old Testament heroes of faith such as Abraham, Moses, David, and many others. Their life stories are an inspiration to us as we run our race.

For us, the “great cloud of witnesses” also includes faithful family members, friends, and mentors who have shared Jesus with us and encouraged us in our faith journey. As we run our race, we should be encouraged and strengthened by the examples of others who have finished well. And it very well may be that, as these verses suggest, there are times when the Lord lets loved ones in heaven look down on us and cheer us on as we run the race assigned to us.

“Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” (v. 1b). Just as runners take off the ankle weights used for training and the warm-up clothes worn before the race, we should let go of anything that hinders or endangers our relationship with God. Some sins are obvious and we dare not let them entangle us and keep us from finishing well. Some “weights” may be morally neutral, but the Holy Spirit lets us know that we can run better—live more effectively for Christ—if we will give these things up.

“And let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (v. 1b). Every believer has an assigned course to run. How we finish our race is all important! And the next few words give us the key to finishing well:

“Looking to Jesus” (v. 2a). The New International Version says it more clearly and emphatically: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” If we are to finish well our assigned race, we must keep our eyes on Jesus—not ourselves, not our circumstances, not other people. Success in this race requires a determined focus on the one who is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

Two final thoughts come to mind about how we can finish well the most important race of all—our journey of faith with Christ:

In order to finish well, we must remember that the Christian life is not a short, fast sprint but a long-distance marathon. Faithfulness over the long haul will get us to the finish line. Finishing well will require both “perseverance” and “discipline.”

All around us are living examples of such marathon finishers:

- Husbands and wives who stay faithful to each other “until death do us part.”
- Christians who navigate their older years still growing, still serving.
- Church members who weather the rougher patches of church life without becoming bitter and disillusioned but remaining joyful, loving, and faithful.

In order to finish well, we must be determined to complete our assigned race and cross the finish line.

We see this kind of godly determination in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. At the end of his race, Paul is imprisoned under the Roman Emperor Nero, chained in his cell like a common criminal. Paul knows that his work is nearly done and his life nearly over, as he anticipates execution. In that dark prison cell, Paul pens these triumphant words:

“I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

I don’t know about you, but I want to finish well! I may fall down at times. I will always need God’s grace to make it. But, through it all, I am determined to keep my eyes on Jesus. And one day, I want to hear Him say, as I cross the finish line: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have fought the good fight, you have finished the race, you have kept the faith. Come and enter now into the joy of your Lord.”

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