

Faithful to the Finisher to the Finish

In my high school years I was quite enthusiastic about athletics in general and the sprints in particular. I subscribed to a magazine called *Track and Field News* and when it came, I devoured it. I poured through the lists and the results. When it came to the results of races, there was always a sad sight. You would have all the athletes listed in their order of finishing, and then you would have one or two at the very end of the list. They were not given a number for finishing, and next to their name, there would be no time. Instead, there would be just a few letters, either DQ, disqualified for stepping out of their lane, or DNF – did not finish.

I wonder how many there will be in eternity with a DQ or a DNF next to their names. Paul could say of himself, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Tim. 4:7). But even in recent days, we have seen prominent names announce that they have dropped out of the race, and quit the struggle. Not everyone who claims to be in the race finishes the race.

We have seen throughout our study of Hebrews that the whole book of Hebrews could be summarised in the words “Be Faithful to the Finisher of the Faith, to the finish”. The first 10 chapters prove by comparison that Jesus is the Finisher, the Fulfillment, the Completion of the ancient and true faith. He is the fulfillment of the faith believed by saints before the Flood, and the saints during the time of promise, and the saints in Israel. He is the final and ultimate prophet, priest and king. Better than the thrones of angels, better than Moses, better than Levi and Aaron.

For that reason, the book has been exhorting us repeatedly, and now unceasingly from chapter 11 onwards, to remain faithful. If you have drawn near to God through Jesus, if you have diligently sought the reward of all He is, then hold the confession of your faith firm to the end. There is no alternative. There is no parallel priesthood, or substitute prophet, or co-regent that you can turn to. To turn back or to turn aside is to turn away.

The high point of the book is 10:19-24, where he brings it all to an application: 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith... 23 Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering,...And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, (Heb. 10:22-24)

Chapter 11 was one long illustration of what this drawing near and holding fast confession looks like. They all saw the promises of God in Messiah to be the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen, real and sure enough to bank on. They believed God in Messiah was a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, so they did. They drew near and held fast. Some ended in triumph, some ended in what looked like defeat. But they all finished in faith – faith in the Finisher.

After that chapter-long illustration, he is returning to application. It is really the same thing he said back in 10:19-24: draw near to Christ, hold fast the confession. Be faithful. But now he clothes it in another illustration, another image. It is the image so vivid to people of all periods of time: a race, an athletic contest. A race is strenuous, physically arduous. Any race over 200 metres taxes our bodies enormously, and our limbs and lungs cry out for relief: to stop, drop out, withdraw from the race. The Christian life is arduous, strenuous, and punishing upon our endurance. It is tempting to stop.

But to do so means your name doesn't even make it onto the lists of athletes and their times. You end up with the horrible three letter abbreviation: DNF. Did not finish.

The Christian life has no consolation prizes or participation rosettas for people who did not finish.

The reason for that is that God distinguishes true believers from false ones by the fact that true faith endures to the end. "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience. Luk 8:15

To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God." (Rev. 2:7)

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." (Rev. 2:11)

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; (Rev. 3:5)

When you believe on the living Christ, you have a living faith. When you abide in Him and He in you, He never lets go of you, and consequently you do not let go of Him. He ever lives to make intercession for you, and consequently you hold your faith firm to the end.

Spurgeon: "Conversion is a turning into the right road; the next thing is to walk in it. The daily going on in that road is as essential as the first starting if you would reach the desired end. To strike the first blow is not all the battle; to him that overcometh the crown is promised. To start in the race is nothing, many have done that who have failed; but to hold out till you reach the winning post is the great point of the matter. Perseverance is as necessary to a man's salvation as conversion."

But one of the means God uses to ensure that living faith makes it to the finish is His Word exhorting us to run to the finish. That is the central command of this passage: "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). Let us keep drawing near, keep holding fast, keep diligently seeking in this race, otherwise known as the Christian life.

But that central command has three supports. These are the three legs on the chair of enduring faith, the three wheels on the trike of persevering faith.

I. Run to the Finish By Remembering the Witnesses

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (Heb. 12:1)

The first way our faith makes it to the finish is to bring chapter 11 into chapter 12. That word "therefore" is a bridge which tells us that the big number 12 in your Bible does not signify a change in thought. In fact, it's this word "therefore" is an unusual connector word that only occurs twice in the New Testament. It means, *for this very reason, in light of*. He walked us down the corridor of the gallery of faith in chapter 11, and showed us picture after picture of faith, so he could use it to exhort us to run with endurance.

They make up just a sampling of what he calls a great cloud of witnesses. A cloud refers to a huge mass. They are witnesses, the word is the root of our English word *martyr*, which means those who testify of the faith. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Judges, the kings, the prophets, the anonymous heroes of the Old Covenant all drew near to God in faith, held fast their confession to the end.

Because of them, in light of the fact that these people and acts of faith surround us, **therefore** let us run with endurance. How does that work?

First, you can accent the word "also". We can also do what other, normal, everyday people did. It is the power of example, the encouraging power of knowing others having done what we are being told to do. Seeing someone else do it, seeing someone else succeed or finish is the power of example. It's why little siblings try so hard to walk, when they see older brother doing it. It's why

young soccer players watch Youtube clips of Messi. It's why people talk about role models. It's why Scripture tells us not only to hear sound doctrine, but to imitate good examples.

Jesus said **John 13:15** "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. (Jn. 13:15)

Philippians 3:17 Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Phil. 3:17)

1 Corinthians 11:1 Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. (1 Cor. 11:1)

3 John 1:11 Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. (3 Jn. 1:11)

Examples says, it is doable. It has been done. Here is how they did it. As you are on lap 25, and your legs are burning, and your chest feels like it is on fire, in the stands you see the smiling and cheering faces of Noah, and Abraham, and Gideon, and Jeremiah, and Paul, and Peter. For that matter, you also see Athanasius, and Luther, and Wesley and Owen, and McCheyne and Bunyan, and Spurgeon.

The cloud of witnesses says, you can do it! Others have, and you can also.

Second, you can accent the word "surrounded". We are part of a great train of believers, part of a great relay race and this is our moment. If you were ever part of a relay race in swimming or running, there is something about a relay that brings an extra amount of speed and intensity and endurance. Three others have run or swum as hard as they can, and it is up to you to not drop it or lose the race.

The cloud of witnesses says, you must do it! All this momentum has led up to this day. You cannot drop the baton now, you cannot drop out. Those witnesses are not only cheering you on to finish for your own sake, but for theirs: to carry on what they lived and fought, and endured and died for.

There is a sense in which the all the exploits of biblical history, as well as those of church history now come to this moment. The martyrdom of Polycarp, the exile of Athanasius, the persecution of the Waldenses and Anabaptists, the imprisonment of Rutherford, the torture of brethren in communist countries in this last century is included in that golden baton called the faith that is now handed to you.

How vital for God's people to be thoroughly familiar with the cloud of witnesses. A Christian who knows little about biblical and church history is like a man with amnesia. To not remember the past is to have no identity in the present. To care little about biblical and Christian history is to shun your own culture: Christian culture. It is to snub your own people. It may even be a breaking of the fifth commandment: to honour father and mother. The church triumphant contains our fathers and mothers, and poor is the Christian who turns up his nose at the gold of history.

*And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave, again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

We run to the finish by remembering our forebearers.

II. Run to the Finish By Removing Your Weights

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (Heb. 12:1)

If we want to run with endurance the race set before us, we must lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares us. If you want to travel far, you must travel light. Runners' gear is usually

extremely light, designed to not chafe or get in the way or impede movement. The second key to finishing is to get rid of, and strip down every bulky, heavy, cumbersome thing that slows you down and tempts you to stop.

The first and most obvious of those things is sin. Every act of transgression, every act of disobedience is an act of unbelief at some level. It's a misstep, and sometimes it is even a stumble. For the Christian, a fall is a fall forward, but no one wants to keep falling.

So the writer tells us to lay aside all sin. This word is the same word used in so many of the New Testament's most famous passages on sanctification. In Ephesians 4:22, it's "put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man". In James 1:21, it's "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness," in Peter 2:1, it's "Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking,".

This is the often-repeated New Testament doctrine of killing sin. We must flee from temptation. We must not yield our members to unrighteousness. We must make no provision for sin. We must flee all appearance of evil. We must be willing to cut off our hands, pluck out our eyes if they cause us to sin. If you are to combine and summarise those different ways of saying it, it amounts to, weaken and starve and kill sin wherever you become aware of it.

The writer tells us that sin so easily ensnares us. The idea is that sin actually cleverly wraps around us. Sin is like a weed. Weeds thrive without cultivation. Just leave them alone and they spread and multiply. This is why John Owen said, "Kill sin or it be killing you". Every sin you accommodate can come to dominate. The longer you allow it, the more stubborn and crippling it becomes. You think you have it under control; just a minor sin. But like a little pebble in the shoe seems inconsequential when you start the race, after five kilometres, it has turned into a blister. If not dealt with, it can become crippling. Don't negotiate with cancer. Don't paint over rust.

He doesn't only tell us to lay aside sin, but to lay aside weights. Now it's possible he means the same thing by the term, but I think by separating them out, he is making space for the idea that there are some things in our lives that we can choose that are not sinful, but they become weights.

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Cor. 6:12)

all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. (1 Cor. 10:23)

There are many lawful things in life. They don't fail the test of "does this break a commandment". But not everything that is permissible is always useful, spiritually strengthening. It might be lawful for an athlete to drink Coke every day. It's not banned, like steroids are banned. But it probably won't be helpful. And if he's serious about finishing, he lays aside not only what is forbidden, but also what might be detrimental, unhelpful, waste.

In 1845, something called the Franklin Expedition sailed from England to find a passage across the Arctic Ocean. Sadly, the crew filled their two sailing ships with a lot of heavy items they didn't need: a 1,200-volume library, fine china, crystal goblets, and sterling silverware for each officer with his initials engraved on the handles. And incredibly, each ship took only a 12-day supply of coal for their auxiliary steam engines. The ships soon became trapped in vast frozen plains of ice. Lord Franklin himself died. The surviving men decided to trek to safety in small groups, but none of them survived. One of those groups was simply two officers who had pulled a large sled more than 65 miles across the treacherous ice. When rescuers found their bodies, they discovered that the sled was filled with table silver.

Some Christians are not watchful over what comes to slow them down and weigh them down. They notice only the forbidden, and they live by the question "What's wrong with this?" But the Christian who wants to endure asks, "What's right about this? Is this helpful? Will this keep me spiritually useful to God? Will it maintain my availability to be used by God? Will this increase my maturity in Christ? Will this multiply my effectiveness for God?"

I have seen Christians weighed down by a hobby that comes to consume their time, their money, their Sundays. Sometimes it is financial debt that weighs Christians down against usefulness. A sport or bodily fitness can ironically become a weight in many people's spiritual lives. Sometimes a child's extra-mural, his sport or his musical instrument or his chess or robotics begins to choke out church attendance, availability to serve others, interest in other people and their families, love for the lost, willingness to go to seminary or be equipped. Sometimes your house or your car can become all-consuming. Sometimes trips to the cabin, or the river, or the coast or the mountains become weights. Sometimes it is having a close family and wanting to be near to and around close family and familiarity weighs them down. They're always good things, which is why we defend them so vehemently. But some of that defensiveness is not righteous war against legalism, it is often guilty protectionism.

Luk 9:59-62 Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."
61 And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go *and* bid them farewell who are at my house." (Lk. 9:61)

Yes, it's lawful. But is this thing helping your faith? Is it making you more available to serve others? Is it strengthening your testimony? Is it making you more flexible to be enlisted in serving God? Is it developing your hunger for God? Athletes think in terms of fitness and health, not in terms of "is it banned"?

2Ti 2:4 No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

Finishers remember their examples, the witnesses. Finishers remove their encumbrances, their weights.

But in fact the most powerful way of running with endurance is found in verse 2.

III. Run to the Finish by Riveting on the Winner

2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. 4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. (Heb. 12:2-4)

The cloud of witnesses gives us encouragement and a sense of obligation. Removing the sin and the weights enables us to run unimpeded. But here is the real energy in your faith legs, here is the real power of a faith that endures. It looks, and remains focused on the Author and Finisher of Our faith.

When running, you are not supposed to look at your feet. You are not supposed to look at the stands and the supporters. You are not really supposed to even look at the other athletes. You are supposed to keep your head up and look straight ahead. For us, the One straight ahead is the object of our faith: Jesus.

This word for looking means to give attention to one thing to the exclusion of all else. It is to look with undivided attention, to fix one's eyes without distraction. You don't focus on your own

performance, that will only discourage you. You don't focus on other Christians and what they are or aren't doing. You don't focus on the world or the culture.

Enduring Christians have a focus riveted on the Person and Work of Christ. What is it about Him that will cause us to endure? His identity, his actions and his attitude.

His identity. He is called the author and the finisher of our faith. He is the beginning, the very start of the faith. He was the One Promised in Genesis 3:15, the one that Abel was trusting in. This word also mean the leader. He is the ultimate example, the chief exemplar of faith and faithfulness.

He is the finisher. The word finisher means the perfecter or completer. He fulfills the prophecies, the promises, the types, the shadows. He completely fulfilled the Law and the will of the Father. He completed the work of the Cross, and shouted in victory "It is Finished".

My faith is not in one of the runners, but in the One who made the race, and completed it perfectly, and waits at the finish line with reward. He is the trailblazer and the record-breaker. To endure is to keep looking at the one who began it and will complete it.

His actions. We are told that Jesus endured the cross and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. He ran the most exhausting race of all, because His was one of accepting humanity, living among sinners, and according to verse 3, endured such hostility from sinners against Himself. For thirty-something years, he had to live among sinners, and endure their hard-heartedness, their blindness, their spiritual dullness, their worldliness, their unbelief. He had to endure being anonymous, despised, And finally He had to endure the Cross, suspended between Heaven and Earth, absorbing scorn from men and judgement from God, mocking by men, and wrath from God, rejection from men and forsaken by God. He endured all the way to the shedding of His blood, the end of His life. We endure by seeing Him live and die for us.

As we look to Jesus, we see the author and finisher of our faith, we see the ultimate endurance athlete who endured all the way to the Cross, until He was exalted at the Father's right hand. How did he do it? Scripture here gives us His attitude.

His attitude. What kept Him going? who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, He pursued the joy set before Him and despised the shame. That's a powerful combination. Positively, Jesus kept in front of Him the reward of His sufferings. He kept before Him the increased joy and glory of bringing home many sons to glory. He kept before Him that moment of sitting down again beside the Father, to the cheering throng of galaxies of angels. John 13:3 captures what was in Jesus' mind when He began to wash feet: Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God,

That was the positive. Look at the negative: he despised the shame. The word for despise means to regard lightly, to think little of it. All the shame and disgrace and humiliation being poured upon Him, Jesus dismissed it as small and trivial. He was not going to take it to heart, or be shocked at it. It was a living embodiment of 2 Corinthians 4:17: 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, (2 Cor. 4:17)

We endure the same way. We see the joy, the promises set before us. We regard the suffering, the shame, the trial as a light thing by comparison. We scoff at the world's scoffing, we dismiss the world's rejection, we count the sacrifices as light things compared to the joys and privileges coming. Considering him, looking to Him, is the antidote to becoming weary and discouraged. We have not yet done what He did. We have not resisted to blood, we have not yet given up our lives in the race. He is still ahead of us and setting the pace.

If we look away from him, and look at others, at ourselves, or behind us, or how long the race

seems, or how many others have dropped out, we will become weary and discouraged. This is why Paul tells us in 2 Cor 4:1 and 4:16 that we do not lose heart. He tells us in Galatians 6:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:13 to not grow weary in doing good. Why? Because we are tempted to do just that

Endurance means remembering the witnesses, your fore-bearers. You can finish because they did, and you must finish because they've handed the baton to you. Endurance means laying aside your weights, your hindrances. Sin causes you to stumble. Lawful things that become too important to us weigh us down. But most of all, endurance means riveting our focus on Jesus. He is the Finisher. He finished His race, by looking to the joy and thinking little of the shame and suffering.

My prayer is that no one listening to this, and no one here who has named Christ as Lord and Saviour will one day be on the lists of humanity, with the letters DNF next to them. Rather, that if the Lord does not return before then, we'll remember these words, "To live is Christ and to die is gain."