

Your Christian Life Is a Contest

Hebrews 12:1

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race ...”

The word race (*agon*) is used in Greek to represent *any* athletic contest where victory or mastery over an opponent is required, such as running, boxing, and wrestling. It is translated *suffering* in Philippians 1:29 and *struggle* in Colossians 2:1. We get our English word “agony” from this word. If you are thinking of a race like Usain Bolt runs in the Olympics, you are missing the meaning. You and I are in serious life struggles.

I. The contest is between going back to an old pattern of living and staying Christ’s course for you.

This is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews (Heb. 2:1; Heb. 3:1, 12, 17; Heb. 5:13; Heb. 6:1-6). The author was writing to many Hebrew Christians who wanted to turn back to their old ways. The encouragement he gave is some of the same encouragement that we could give today to Christians.

A. The struggle you have could be an old pattern of behavior ... drugs, alcohol, immorality, etc.

B. The struggle you have could be an old pattern of emotion and attitude ... anger, selfishness, gossip, or retribution. God has changed our lives through Jesus Christ, but the new life we live is not easy. God is more interested in your *endurance* than He is your *excuses*. Fight those old habits: fight, fight.

II. The crowd around you is an encouragement for you to endure unto the end.

“Therefore, since we have a great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us” (v. 1). Who are these people? These words are an allusion to the ancient Olympic Games of Greece (begun in Olympia in 776 BC). But there are witnesses surrounding “us.” Who are these witnesses watching our Christian struggle?

A. They are men and women who have run the race before us and endured.

You are not an island. This is why your friends, those with whom you connect, are so important.

B. They are the men and women about whom you can read in Hebrews 11.

One of the greatest gifts you could give yourself is the pleasure of knowing other’s stories.

C. They are the men and women whom God has placed in your life, now and in the past.

The word translated “witnesses” is really the word from which we get our word “martyr.” It is a word full of meaning and instruction. These witnesses are people in your life who:

- Have voluntarily laid down their lives for the sake of Christ.
- Have born witness to you of Christ, His grace, His faithfulness, and His sufficiency.
- Are still running the race with you and shouting encouragement to you.

III. The call to you in the midst of your struggle is one of practical encouragement.

God is more interested in how you finish the Christian life than He is in how you begin the Christian life. I like how the Amplified Bible puts the call of encouragement in the midst of your Christian struggle: “Let us (1) strip off and throw aside every encumbrance—unnecessary weight—(2) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us, and let us (3) run with patient endurance and steady and active persistence the appointed course of the race that is set before us.

A. There are two things to lay aside: weight and sin. One is amoral and the other moral. One is not as clear to others (but it is to you), and one is very clear to those around you. Lay it aside. Notice that sin deftly and cleverly clings to you and entangles you. Sin is very deceptive in nature.

B. There is one thing to look at: “Looking unto Jesus” (12: 2). We’ll see next time the importance of how He lived, what He gave, and the example He showed. He becomes the focus of our Christianity. Is it hard for you? Do you feel like giving up? Remember, until you sweat blood, you aren’t done.