

CAN YOU STAND THE PACE?

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

INTRODUCTION: The pace of an athlete is tough.

Football is a good example.

Vince Lombardi, Green Bay's coach, called pro football "A Game for Madmen."

Coach Parseghian of Notre Dame belonged to that breed of men who have to win. His players stifled outcries of pain, lived under harsh discipline, and never questioned his authority.

They were disciplined to place one knee on the ground during the so-called "information periods."

They were not called "time outs," because that might suggest someone was tired!

If a player is injured he must try to get off the field under his own steam.

"Never let 'em know you're hurt," the defensive coach preached.

We saw a superb exhibition of ability to stand a demanding pace in the ¹⁹⁶⁷ world series (this past week) in the pitching performance of Bob Gibson of the St. Louis Cardinals.

(He proved to everyone without any doubt that he had what it takes to stand up to the requirements and win.)

In much the same way Christ demands that his followers stand up to the pace which he has set for us in the Christian life.

In some ways it almost seems that he tries to discourage some would-be followers from jumping on the band wagon without understanding what they are getting into.

He says in substance, "Are you sure you can take it?"

"Can you be baptised with the baptism of suffering with which I am baptised? (MK. 10:38)

"It is better not to start out and put your hand to the plow, if you are going to look and turn back.

"Are you willing to take up your cross daily, and deny yourself, and follow me?

If you are, come on; but don't ever say I told you it was going to be an easy road.

It will be hard and tough, but I'll help you and stay with you, and lead you through if you'll let me."

These things are implied in our text for this (morning's) sermon - Hebrews 12:1-2.

The Boston Marathon is one of the greatest running races of the nation. (On Monday the 17th of April 1978) there were (4,700) official runners and another (1,500) unofficial runners in the 26.2 mile course ending up in downtown Boston. To qualify for the Boston Marathon and get an official number, a male under the age of 40 must have completed a certified marathon under three hours. That means averaging less than seven minutes per mile for the 26.2 miles.

The older men over 40 and all women are given an additional 30 minutes to complete the course in order to qualify. What a break! Along the entire route into Boston (last Monday) there were more than half a million spectators cheering the runners on, yelling encouragement, and offering them drinks and ice cubes. (My friend Major Nick Nichols from Fort McClellan described it as "fantastic") By the way the official winner of the 1978 Boston Marathon was Bill Rodgers who finished in two hours, 10 minutes and 13 seconds.)

The Bible tells us that the Christian Life which we are in on earth is like a great marathon race, and our crowd of spectators watching us and cheering us on is indeed the great cloud of witnesses made up of the saints of God who have already finished their race in Heaven and are now looking down on the earth with tremendous interest as we run on in our Christian Race.

I. THE RACE

A. The people of God are people on the move.

1. "The Way." Followers of "The Way" ~~perpetuate~~ who to
2. The church is not a successful club, ~~leisure~~ ~~hold~~
nor a fallout shelter,

~~and~~ ~~old~~ ~~and~~ ~~empty~~ ~~rooms~~
nor a religious supermarket in which we bump
carts with our neighbors as we ~~select~~ what appeals
people ~~to~~ ~~new~~ ~~things~~

3. We are on the march - the church militant.

4. It is a demanding race

5. It is a race in which we are surrounded with a
great cloud of witnesses,

a. The saints of the old covenant

b. "Apart from us they could not be made perfect."

~~Such is the unity of the Church,
and such the power of faith,
that those who could not believe,
or could not believe in a certain way,
for themselves,
receive the fullness of the blessing through
the faith of others.~~

~~The saints of the old covenant have,
through the faith of the Christian Church,
entered into more immediate and intimate
communion with God than they had before.~~

Now we understand why they take so deep
an interest in the running of the Christian
athletes on earth.

6. It is "a particular Race" for each of us (TLB)

B. A race implies both a hope and a contest.

1. The hope of faith is simple and well understood.

The most prominent feature of the faith of the
O.T. heroes was expectation of a future blessing.

Faith to them was "the assurance of things
hoped for." (Heb. 11:1)

2. The conflict or contest of the race is twofold.

a. With ourselves

We must put away our own grossness,
as athletes rid themselves by severe training
of all superfluous flesh.

When you are overweight you have more fat stored
up in your body than is necessary or good for you.
Excessive fat storage, particularly about vital
organs, reduces physical efficiency and hurts
your health.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" can be paraphrased, "Can you pass through the dark waters of suffering through which I must pass?"

In this unusual request that they make, we see the forthright ambition of James and John. They wanted to sit at Christ's right hand and left hand as chief cabinet office in the new monarchy.

This shows us how the disciples thought of their Master. They believed in him; they were sure he had the power to establish the messianic kingdom.

But their conception of the kingdom was earthy; they expected him to triumph over his foes and to establish an empire with ranks, officials and thrones.

One wanted to sit on his right as next in power, and the other on his left, third in power.

Now wasn't that ridiculous?

But before we condemn them, let us ask if we today are innocent of hankering for "the chief places?"

Christ's answer says in effect: "I have nothing to do with conferring special honors in God's kingdom." God the Father Himself chooses and ordains those to be so honored in His kingdom. God's ordainings are not by "pull" or money or by any human means.

They are not by rule of empire. They are the will of the Father, and that alone. And sometimes the choices of God bring staggering surprises. In His kingdom only those who "serve" are great. The children of God inherit the thrones; the Napoleons and the Hitlers find exile and death.

Jesus said, "You don't know what you are asking." Many of our prayers are ignorant, glib, superficial, selfish, and thoughtless. Sometimes we think we want Heaven's blessing, but we do not count the cost.

Sometimes we may pray for humility, ^{denial} but we forget that humility comes by mortification of the flesh and of our pride. Sometimes we may pray to be a true follower of Christ, but we forget that that is the path of self sacrifice.

Sometimes we crave leadership, like James and John, but we overlook the fact that all leadership carries proportionate responsibility and anxiety and service.

We aspire to the throne, but have no desire to live, as Tennyson wrote, "in that fierce light which beats upon a throne."

God's thrones are already prepared for those for whom He has ordained them; and that ordination may or may not rest on us.

Our main prayer must always be for clearer vision of God's purpose or will for us, and for a willingness to obey and trust Him for whatever He has for us.

And, whatever our prayer, we must always add the saving word to our prayer:

"Thy will be done."

And we must not have any rash confidence. We must think seriously before we say proudly: "We are able." We forget the human paradox: we are strong only when we know our weakness and trust in God's strength. The thrones of God's victories are reached by the drinking of a bitter cup of sacrifice with Jesus and by the baptism of dark waters. Strange road to a throne! But if He so chooses us and leads us He has promised to go with us through those dark waters and meet us on the other side of the river on that shining shore of the Celestial City!

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conflict

b. With the "sin which clings so closely"

The word "besetting" in KJV does not refer to the special sin to which every individual is most prone. It might refer to sin, not merely as a temptation, but much more as an overpowering force, silent, passive, closing in upon him on all sides, --- a constant pressure from which there seems to be no escape.

II. THE PACE

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Pacemaker.

B. There is nothing static about our discipleship.

C. We must not become distracted and diverted and fail to keep Jesus steadily in sight.

D. We are to run with resolution, with patience or perseverance.

This is not easy resignation, but active, positive endurance with a purpose and a motive.

E. We look to Jesus as He IS and as He WAS:

As He is for help;

As He was for a perfect example.

1. He is the Leader and Perfecter of our faith.

To us in the military leadership is important.

The best example of good leadership is in Jesus.

2. He was on earth the perfect example of victory through endurance.

He endured the cross, despising the shame.

F. He sets the pace; we are to consider Him

so that we may not grow weary or fainthearted.

III. THE GRACE - vs. 15

A. To run the race and to keep the pace with Christ requires more than good training, good conditioning in ourselves, and determination.

We are to push on, but not in our own strength alone. "Without me," said Jesus, "Ye can do nothing."

To run the straight race over rugged terrain we need God's grace.

B. That all-sufficient, unearned, undeserved love of God in action is available for us.

"Run the straight race through God's good grace,

Lift up thine eyes and seek His face;

Life with its way before us lies,

Christ is the path, and Christ the prize."

CONCLUSION: You have entered the Christian race; of the Isthmus Your Lord Jesus Christ sets the pace and longs to give you His grace, that you may finish your course with honor.

So then, we discover that the Christian race is not an easy one.

It was never meant to be easy.

Sometimes when night came Jesus didn't have a place to lay his head.

He was persecuted and put to death; and we disciples who follow him should not expect to win a popularity contest from the same crowd that crucified our Lord.

Everyone who runs with Jesus finds that he sets a tough pace. None of this jogging two minutes and walking or resting TEN with him. Christ is the Captain of our Tract and Field Team, and he sets a steady, reasonable, and consistent pace for us.

Although this pace is demanding and tough, we are assured by the fact that He gives his followers the grace and strength we need to run our particular race with dignity and honor to final victory.

A good athletic coach is very demanding in his training discipline, but he inspires such loyalty in his players that there is nothing they wouldn't try to do for him.

So Jesus Christ is the coach of our Christian Team, and although his demands of discipleship are high, his spiritual GRACE is more than adequate for every need.

Whatever he TELLS us to do he also ENABLES us to do.

It never enters our minds to say, "Lord, I can't." The two words, "Yes, Lord" go together; the two words, "No, Lord" never go together. Because He is our Lord, therefore we know that by his grace we can do anything.

Ankhe, Vietnam

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he wants us to do

Gateway B.C. Nov '80

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