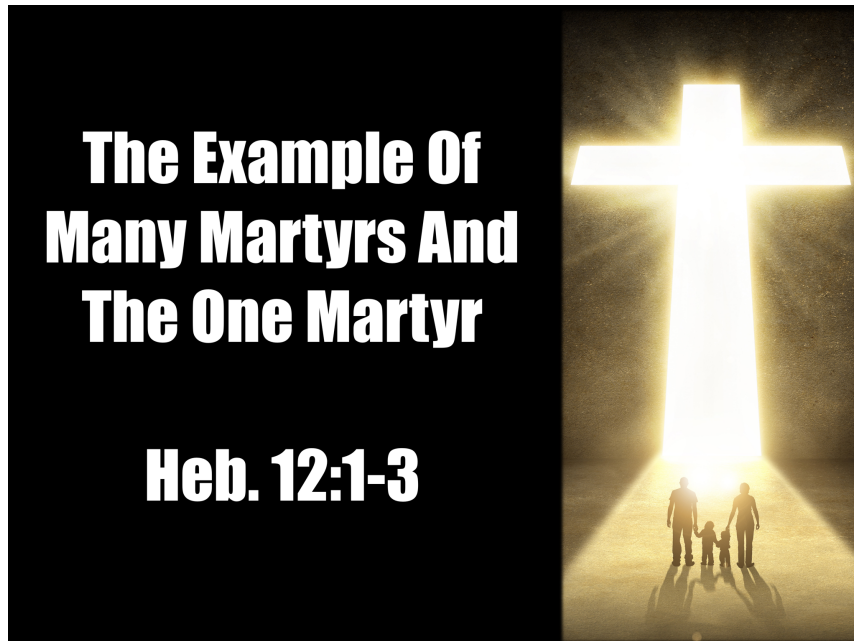


The Example Of Many Martyrs And The One Martyr (Hebrews 12:1-3 December 6, 2015)



I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has told me that their sin is too strong for them to overcome.

They hate their sin – but they just can't seem to put it to death.

I wish I had a dollar for every time someone has told me that the Christian life is just too hard – they don't think they can go on.

Life isn't going the way they expect – and they are ready to walk away – maybe even do something stupid.

Tonight, I want to look at one of the passages that encourages me when thoughts like this enter my head.

That passage is Hebrews 12:1-3:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The author of Hebrews uses athletic imagery here. He thinks of us as running the race of life.

Read verse 1 again:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

He talks about a cloud of witnesses who help us to deal with sin in our lives.

When you read this, what is the image that comes to mind here?

Often when Christians read these verses one of a number of images seem to pop into their heads.

Some think that the author of Hebrews wants us to imagine we are in this gruelling race of life fighting sin.

And all the saints who died before us are lining the race cheering us on – urging us to fight sin – be holy – run the good race.

I want to suggest that is **not** the primary image we are supposed to have. Nothing else suggests that departed saints or angels are doing this.

There is another image many people have:



They picture the witnesses as all the saints who have died and are now in heaven and they are looking down on us watching us.

So if we are thinking of sinning – say watching something on our computer we shouldn't – the idea that the saints in heaven are all watching us sin – should help us not sin.

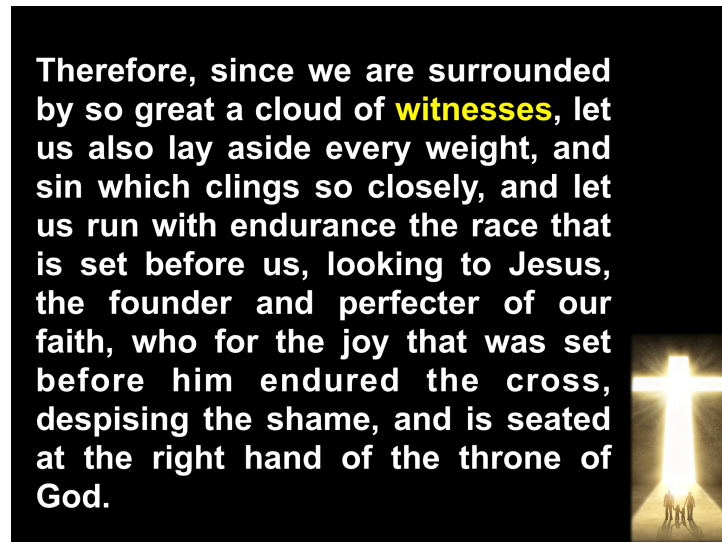
And if that isn't enough:

Remember that your Christian grandma who died recently is one of those saints watching over your shoulder – and you will stop sinning.

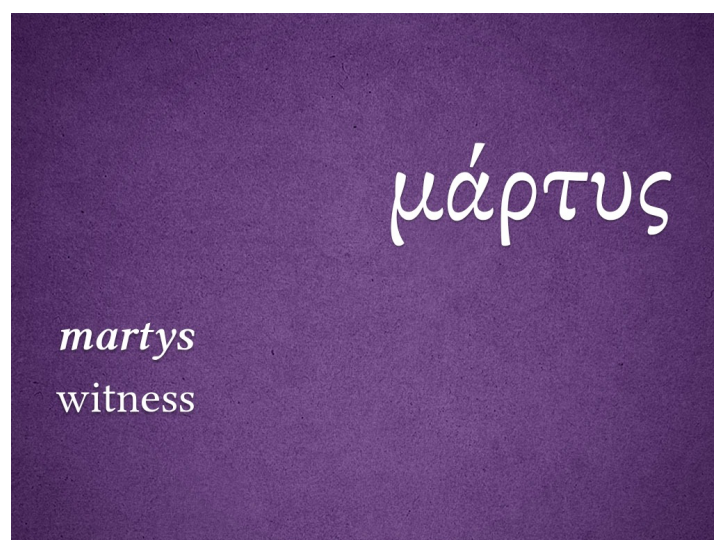
Tempting as this is – I don't believe that is the image the author of Hebrews wants us to have in our minds. It doesn't fit the context and nothing in the Bible suggests the saints in heaven are watching all we do.

So what is he saying?

One of the key words in this passage is the word – **witnesses**.



The word used here for witness is the word – μάρτυς – which is where we get our word *martyr* from.



Before the New Testament was written – μάρτυς – just meant a witness. It was a word associated with the courtroom. It referred to someone who gave a testimony or provided witness to some event or gave testimony concerning some person.

But in the days of the early church it began to take on a different meaning.

The early Christians went forth bearing witness to the power of Christ to save.

But the world decided that the penalty for being a witness to Jesus was death.

If you were a witness to Jesus – you faced the very real prospect of death.

So by the time the New Testament was written, this word took on a more nuanced meaning – it referred to those who witnessed to the power of Jesus – even if it would cost them their lives.

This sense of the word martyr was a particularly Christian meaning. But over time the application broadened to other faiths – and situations.

So today, *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary* gives what I think is a pretty good definition of what the word martyr generally means in the 21st century:

One who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of any belief, principle or cause.

However, we need to remember that *martyr* has its roots in Christianity – so we would say that a martyr is:



**One who is put to death or
endures great suffering on behalf
of the Lord Jesus**

One who is put to death or endures great suffering on behalf of the Lord Jesus.

The author of Hebrews has this idea in mind in our text and he uses this word to paint a vivid picture.

He says Christians are surrounded by a cloud of these martyrs – these witnesses who gave their lives for Jesus.

Some have said these are angels.

Some have said these are all the saints who have died and are in heaven.

Some have said these are specifically the saints who gave their lives for the gospel.

But, in the context, I believe there is little doubt that the writer of Hebrews has in mind a specific group of martyrs. Those he just referred to in chapter 11. The – *therefore* – links chapter 12 with chapter 11.

With this in mind, there are **two** points I want you to get from this passage.

The *first* is:

**The many martyrs encourage us to run
to win by living with discipline**



The many martyrs encourage us to run to win by living with discipline

Hebrews 11 speaks of some specific Old Testament saints who suffered for the faith and many died. **But** there is one thing about these Old Testament martyrs the writer of Hebrews wants to remind us of – *they were fallible men and women – just like us.*

Sometimes we can read chapter 11 – Righteous Abel. Reverent Noah. Faithful Abraham. Suffering Moses. King David – and our lives seem so far removed from these pillars of the faith.

But that is absolutely **not** the point of chapter 11.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of **witnesses**, let us **also** lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.



Notice the word – **also** – in verse 1.

The point of the witnesses – the martyrs – in chapter 11 is that they laid aside hindrances and sin and ran the race of life with endurance – **and we can also do this!**

Maybe consider a few of the names – Jacob, Rahab, Samson, Jephthah – men and women with very obvious failings – who God enabled to overcome.

The reality is that these martyrs in chapter 11 struggled with sin – just as we do.

Lust, greed, faithlessness. But here is what they had in common – by faith – God enabled them to overcome.

The imagery is not of saints in heaven watching us or cheering us on – these witnesses are fellow competitors in the race of life. It is just that their race was run before ours began. They *also* ran the race of life.

They struggled mightily – **but** by the power of faith given to them by God – they fought the good fight and persevered to the end.

Now they serve as examples to us of the very same power of God – available for us to overcome sin and stay the course.

You see – this is not a race with just one winner. You win just by finishing the race and enduring to the end.

These martyrs did that and so can you!

Think of the sin or sins you struggle with the most. The ones you pray – God take this from me.

I want to tell you a couple of truths about those sins.

First, you are **not** the only Christian to struggle mightily with that sin. Whatever your sin is:



Get in line. Plenty of other Christians have struggled the same.

I love to read Christian biographies. I especially love the ones which present the person warts and all. Their sins, their failings, their struggles.

Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Spurgeon, Elliot. Great names.

But every one of them had sins they battled with throughout their lives.

I hate the biographies that just focus on someone's victories. I read those and I feel that I can't relate to them.

But flawed men and women – them I can relate to.

David, Samson, Jacob – them I can relate to.

But there is a *second* truth we are supposed to learn – there is a long line of Christians who were empowered from from above to put sin to death.

Don't get me wrong – putting sin to death is hard – really hard.

Some of the godliest men and women in history struggled mightily to put sin to death.

Again, read through those names in chapter 11 – Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab. None had a saloon passage through life. There were trials and suffering and pain.

The same sins popped up again and again.

But every one of them persevered and endured to the end. They had many reasons to fall away – they did not.

When the storms of life come – when we feel we can't go on – when we feel God has deserted us – stop and remember – there is nothing we face in this life that the saints of old have not already faced.

We follow in the footsteps of a long line of faithful men and women who persevered to the end.

Their lives had struggle and pain – but they endured to the end – and they became a witness that we too can finish the race.

Just read their lives and you see their flaws.

Noah – his drunken failings.

Abraham – fearing for his life and lying repeatedly about Sarah.

Jacob – lying, failing his family, succumbing to the temptations of the world.

Let alone Rahab, Samson, David whose failings are so obvious for all to see.

I read the Old Testament – I read of Jacob – who seems to fail at every hurdle of faith – and then I find him here in Hebrews as a hero of the faith.

I read of David who was as human and flawed as me.

And I find hope that God can finish the work He began in me – in you – in anyone.

No one had an easy ride. Listen to chapter 11 verses 35-38:

Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release ... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

But, they **all** were enabled to finish the course. Verse 39:

And all these, though commended through their faith.

God Himself enabled these flawed men and women – who were perfected through their suffering and affliction – to finish the race of life and be found faithful at the end.

The saints of chapter 11 show us the whole spectrum. Some were Kings, some were prostitutes. Some were wealthy, some were impoverished. Some committed heinous sins, others seemed to have stayed fairly faithful.

Their lives show the ups and downs – the struggles – the setbacks – the distractions – but when the end of their lives came – all of these were numbered among the faithful. They were commended for their faith.

OK – but what we want to know is **how** do we follow their example and run with endurance this race set before us?

First – we have to lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.

Remember the author of Hebrews is using an athletic metaphor.

In preparing for the games – the athlete must discipline themselves to get rid of everything that hinders them.

Weight, laziness, ill discipline.

If you are overweight good on you for getting on the bike – but I do want to suggest that you are unlikely to finish the Tour De France let alone win it. You won't get up any of the hill stages

But the image in this verse is more than just being overweight.

The image we have to have in mind is preparing to run an ultramarathon and looking down to find we have to try and drag a ball and chain over the course.

The race is hard enough without that hindrance.

In the Christian life – what are the things that weigh you down and stop you from persevering to the end?

Hindrances such as the love of money, lack of discipline, love of career.

I am not sure what they are with you. What actually hinders us varies from person to person.

Some of us get so wrapped up in career, mortgage, school fees – that the race of our life is just like our non-Christian neighbours. Our time and energy are monopolised by the world – so there is no time for the kingdom. And we excuse ourselves – by saying – I just don't have time.

Make time. If these things are hindering you – throw them off.

Examine your life – where is *your* ball and chain? God created you for more than a career, a mortgage and month to month living. He wants to use you for His glory.

He doesn't want you just going through the motions and getting to the end of your life saying – wow – that went fast.

Some of us are trying to run the kingdom race carrying fifty extra kilos and hobbled by a ball and chain and we wonder why we find it so hard to keep going and persevere to the end. We need to be done with lesser things.

You can't serve God and money. You can't run hobbled with bitterness and regret and anger and greed. You can't spend fifty years chasing a career and expect to do great things for God.

Whatever hinders us in our Christian life must be done away with.

And as well as these hindrances, we also have the entanglements of sin.

We are to:

Lay aside every sin which clings so closely.

Again the metaphor is a runner in a race.

You can't run if your feet are entangled – you have to throw any entanglement off.

This word for clings is often used of being shackled.

Sin shackles us. You can't run the kingdom race if you are shackled by sin.

If you are enmeshed in sin – you will have no power or desire – to live for God – to make a mark for the kingdom – to be faithful.

Your light is dulled, your mind is distracted, your conscience crushes you.

I don't have to run through the list of sins that might ensnare your life. You know whether there are sins – open sins or those hidden from men – sins that are impeding you.

While those sins are there you can't live fully for God. And they can lead to despair – questioning the power of God, questioning your salvation. They can lead you to turn from the faith.

We get rid of hindrances and sin and we run the race with endurance.

The Christian life is not a sprint it is an ultramarathon and it is tough.

There is a burning sun and potholes and bandits.

Every half mile you want to give up.

It requires great endurance.

In the parable of the soils – Jesus spoke of the sun coming to scorch referring to the trials or life and persecution.

The trials will come.

Spurgeon put it this way.

All the way to heaven, we shall only get there by the skin of our teeth. We shall not go to heaven sailing along with sails swelling to the breeze, like sea birds with their fair white wings, but we shall proceed full often with sails rent to ribbons, with masts creaking, and the ship's pumps at work both by day and night. We shall reach the city at the shutting of the gate, but not an hour before.¹

And every time you want to give up – think of Jacob and Samson and David and Rahab – who probably had more sin and more entanglements than you – and God empowered them to throw off their hindrances and sin and keep going.

Where does this strength come from?

By the discipline of reading the Word, praying, finding accountability, repenting, calling on the power of the Spirit, knowing that you are in Christ and therefore dead to sin.

God provides the power to persevere. He empowered the martyrs – He empowers you.

So, let me summarise.

If men and women who failed – who were drawn to the world – who committed terrible sin – those like Jacob and David and Samson – were enabled by God to overcome their sin – to press on to the end – then so can you.

It is not easy – but God can empower you to do it. This is the encouragement of the many martyrs.

But there is one more example we need to have before us.

¹ Cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) p. 24.

**The many martyrs encourage us to run
to win by living with discipline**

**The one martyr encouraged us to run to
win by focussing on the prize**



The one martyr encourages us to run to win by focussing on the prize.

We look to one more martyr – Jesus – the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Our faith is not only founded on Jesus – it is perfected by Jesus.

Jesus gives us the strength to carry on.

The more you look to Jesus – the more the things of the world – hindrances and sins fade. The more you want to press on because you want Jesus.

The more you love Him – the more you keep moving towards the end.

Fix your eyes on the cross. Jesus – God Himself – died on that cross – to free you from sin, to empower you, to enable you to shed His glory throughout this land.

Jesus did not die in vain. He did not die to see you struggle in your sin.

Do you really think He will fail to enable you to complete the task? Paul knows the answer. Romans 8:32:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. Turn to Him as a helpless soul with arms outstretched and He will perfect your faith.

When the trials come. When the temptations come. When the sin comes.

Stop and fix your eyes on Jesus.

He died so you might run the race with perseverance.

He sent His Holy Spirit so you might run the race with perseverance.

He will not fail you or forsake you.

Trust Him. Ask Him. He will perfect your faith.

Here is where the whole context of chapter 11 comes in.

Noah does not find the faith in himself to spend 120 years building an ark.

Abraham does not suck up the faith to leave Ur and to sacrifice Isaac.

Gideon does not move from a man who threshes wheat in hiding and a man who refuses to attack the Midianites with 22,000 men to a man who trusts God and attacks with 300 men by finding this faith in himself.

These men and women were given impossible tasks:

Trust that God can give a child to a couple past the age of childbearing

Get Israel out from under the might of Pharaoh

Take on the giant Goliath while you are still a boy

But Jesus was the founder *and* perfecter of their faith.

They trusted the promise of God concerning the Messiah to come and God used that faith in mighty ways.

We have our own impossible task. Live faithfully in a world that is beset by the distractions and troubles of our own sin and the temptations that assail us.

No one can do it alone. But with Jesus, we can do it. He is the source of our faith and He perfects that faith in us.

Look back to the first three verses of chapter 11:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

If we struggle to believe that God can help us to overcome our sin and temptations and distractions then we don't really grasp who our God is.

God spoke and the very universe leapt into being.

God who can create the wonder of the Milky Way and the splendour of Adam and Eve – is quite able to give you the faith and perfect your faith so that you can persevere to the end.

He founded your faith – **He** gave it to you – **He** will perfect it.

And one of the ways He perfects it is by urging us to follow His example.

One of the main points in the book of Hebrews is that God Himself in the person of Jesus – left heaven to run the race of life.

Hebrews 2:14–18:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things ... Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, ... For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:14–16:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus became a man and He suffered and He was tempted to give up.

In Gethsemane He cried:

“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.” Luke 22:42.

He knew temptation and struggle.

I can only imagine the horrors of the cross. Jesus knew exactly what lay before Him.

So what enabled Jesus – the God-man – to press on?

For the *joy* set before Him He endured the cross.

Don't get this wrong. Jesus was no masochist.

Nor did He do some kind of mind Zen to convince Himself that pain is pleasure.

No! He looked beyond the cross to what the cross would accomplish. Saving His people – accomplishing the will of the Father.

The joy of Christ came from obedience. In fulfilling the path set before Him. In leading many sons to glory.

And God enabled Him to face the cross and its shame and because He was faithful:

He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He knew the task, He fixed His eyes on the goal and He enjoyed the fruit of righteousness.

He looked at the end goal – not the trials right in front of Him.

I know some of you will find this hard to believe ... but I have never run a marathon.

However, I do know that when you start a marathon – not only can't you see the finish line – but it seems so far, far away.

There is a lot of pain and suffering to go before the line comes into view.

But I am also told that with every stride – something in your mind says – one step closer.

Every time you get through a trial – tell yourself – one step closer to glory.

In the race of life you focus on the reward to come – the finish line – hearing well done good and faithful servant – seeing Jesus – being made perfect – ending the battle with sin – and every hindrance and sin and hurdle you overcome brings you that bit closer.

And overcoming them brings joy – because it brings you closer.

This life is tough. But when we fix our eyes on Jesus and eternity – we keep going for the joy that lies ahead.

And – verse 3:

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

The more we consider the example of Jesus – who willingly chose to suffer for us – who endured so much for us – and did not give in but persevered to the end – His example encourages us to not grow weary or fainthearted.

When bad things happen – we have a reaction – we tell ourselves – I don't deserve this.

Actually – we do deserve it – we are sinners.

It is Jesus who didn't deserve it.

Jesus never sinned – He did not deserve the cross.

But, He endured it – with joy – for us.

And the message is – we can too.

Brothers and sisters. I know this world is tough. Temptations are tough. Persecution is tough. Life is tough – bad things happen.

But when we fix our eyes on the glory of Jesus – He is faithful to strengthen us to persevere – He is able to perfect our faith. And through the pain – there is a joy – a harvest of righteousness and peace. We learn the sweetness of God. We enjoy the fellowship of His sufferings. We take one step closer to heaven.

And finally we can say with Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7-8:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

The runner in a race should have his eyes fixed on one thing – the finish line.

Crowds, scenery, children – nothing should distract him.

Philippians 1:6 – Paul says:

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews wants us to know that we **can** run the race – we **can** throw off every hindrance and sin – by looking to Jesus who perfects the faith He gave us.

Jesus died on the cross – to deal with our sin.

Jesus sent His Holy Spirit – to empower us for our task.

He died so that you might run the race well. He longs to complete the good work He began in you.

I am not sure how you are doing tonight. Some will be doing well. Some will be really struggling.

Whether it is tonight or a month or a year – the day will come when you find it hard to keep going.

Your faith will sag. Sin will seem to be winning. Life will seem too hard.

When that day comes – and it will – remember Jesus is not just the author of faith – He provides the power to perfect your faith.

Remember the martyrs of old. If Samson and Jacob can overcome – so can you. Jesus didn't die on that cross so you can fail.

He died to strengthen you to persevere to the end – to overcome sin – to sit with Him in glory as trophies of grace.

So when the struggle comes – ask Him to strengthen you. Ask Him to unshackle you. Ask Him to free you from that besetting sin.

Fix your eyes on Him and don't look away.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

John Chrysostom lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. He summed up the Christian life in these words:

Many of you have many times been spectators at the Olympic Games, and not only spectators but also enthusiastic partisans and admirers of the competitors. You know then that both during the days of the contests and also all night long, the herald thinks of nothing else and has no other care than that the combatant should not disgrace himself when he goes forth ... If therefore he who is about to engage in a contest before men uses such great forethought, much more will it befit us to be continually thoughtful and earnest, since our whole life is a contest. ... The Judge of the contest is seated at the right hand of the Father. ... Therefore I exhort you: let us lay aside all things and look to One only, as we strive to obtain the prize. ... Let us do all that will enable us to attain to the promised blessings.

Run to please Jesus – do all you can to please Jesus – fix your eyes on the heavenly finish line – and you will find joy to persevere to the end – and you will hear – well done good and faithful servant – enter into your rest.