

Reading: Hebrews 12:1-13

Theme: Running the Race Before Us.

Helping on an EMW Senior camp in Wales for 17 to 21year olds in the mid-1980s, we went white water rafting just outside Bala where the camp was. It was an afternoon camp activity and virtually all the camp wanted to go – including the officers! It was brilliant – carried down the River Trewen by the huge force of the water, avoiding rocks and the bank - sometimes hitting a rock and being thrown into a spin, hanging onto the rope or paddle and then it was over and we were in quiet waters. One timid officer surprised us all by going and asked if he enjoyed it, his reply was *“I hung on and prayed lots!”*

Hebrews 11 is much like white water rafting - the force of the examples, the speed at which we are carried along, the excitement of the events of their lives and the staggering reaches of their faith can leave us quite exhilarated. We are in seemingly quiet waters in our lives and yet we can see the great river of faith we are on. As we come to Hebrews 12 the author is going to apply these things and yet he has one further example of faith and faithfulness to set before his first readers and us. We are presented with a race to run and the example of Jesus to focus on and to consider. Although I didn't plan to, I feel it is good for us to pause and consider the race and our example, so I'm going to look at v1-3 in detail over the next 2 Sunday evenings to see and apply things that are important for all situation and times in our lives.

When much, much younger I did a lot of athletics and in races there were 3 important commands - on your marks, get set, go (*or the starting gun = go*). These are going to be my 3 headings in the 2 sermons, 2 of them this evening:

1. On Your Marks.

The author, probably Paul, was writing to those who were having a hard and tough time as Christians. Some were ready to quit following Christ and go back to Judaism. Here Paul presents the Christian life in terms of a race. It wasn't put as a short and pleasant walk or stroll, but as a race and probably it is to be viewed as a marathon or a cross-country race and not a short sprint. I am (was) made for sprints and not long-distance and 800m was my limit as a competitive race. We are told here that the Christian life is one that needs to be run with perseverance. We need to keep on going. It will need to be stuck at for we can feel like giving up at time - its length, its monotony, its hardships can all get to us and we can feel like giving up, but we are not to. We need to remember this and be ready to keep on keeping on in the Christian life.

For some of us here it may be that this year will take us into the home straight or our race will end. Others may have uphill struggles, storms and wounds that will make us struggle. For others we will get 2nd wind and run with more vigour than previously; for others we will just keep on plodding on and running the race faithfully. We are to realise that this race, like the London Marathon, is one where all who finish get recognised and rewarded. It does not matter that we are not first, or in the first group to finish, but we are to run as if it did matter and we run as if to win. The aim is to finish and to finish well. We are told that all who are Christians have a race marked out for them to run. Perhaps at this point we need to pause and question are we in the race at all? Have we trusted the Lord Jesus as our Saviour? If so, we then have this life race to go on and forward in as we head on to heaven. We do not have the option to drop out and say "*It is too tough, too hard and I would rather sit this out!*" Our duty, our privilege is to keep on going on.

Top athletes train and deny themselves to be at the Olympics. Imagine going there and saying “*No*” in the midst of a race and stopping. I know athletes have had to do that even in Olympic races and they just could not go on. Derek Redmond was a brilliant athlete, especially at the 400m, but he was plagued with many injury problems. In 1992 he was in the Barcelona Olympics and had gone through 5 operations, even one on his Achilles tendon less than 4 months before the games began. Things seem to be coming together at last - he had the fastest time in the first round, won his quarter-final heat and was ready for the semi-final. He had a clean start and was running smoothly when about 150m into the race his right hamstring tore and he fell to the ground like he was poleaxed. The race carried on and finished. As Derek saw the stretcher bearers coming to him, he got up and knew he had to finish the race. The crowd were now cheering him on. His father came onto the track and together hand-in-hand they continued together until just before the finishing line, when his father let him finish on his own and the 65,000 crowd gave Derek a standing ovation. Sadly, he was classed as not finishing as he had been helped in the race by his father!

We're not to view our God, our Saviour Jesus as hard coaches, but view Them as a loving Father and Saviour who cheers us on, encourages and helps us to keep on going. The cloud of witnesses is not to be viewed as those who watch over and look at our lives to criticise, but they are those who encouragingly testify that it is worth going on and declare clearly that our God and Saviour are so wonderful it is worth going on. As to who the crowd of witnesses is commentators are divided! How do we view the ones in Hebrews 11? As spectators cheering us on? But that does not tie in with Scripture as it seems that the souls in heaven are not concerned over, nor does it appear they can see world events, but they are absorbed and concerned only with heavenly glories!

Probably best to think of these as the ones who testify to us by their lives of faith in God that it is worth keeping on going on in this race. We have so much to encourage us by their witness and testimony. The first thing is we need to be on our marks, but also:

2. Get Set.

Are we on our marks? Are we prepared to run the race with perseverance and yet knowing God's help and encouragements as we do so? Brilliant! Now we are to get set. Having done a little bit of hillwalking in Snowdonia and in the Brecon Beacons with school and at university, we were quite pleased with our speed and progress. Some people came up the hills and mountains running past us and also some soldiers were running past us with full kit bags on them - we later realised they were SAS.

The race we are in is one that requires us to keep on going, because of that we are not to unnecessarily weigh ourselves down. If you ever watch a marathon on TV, something like the London Marathon, you'll find there are always 2 classes of runners - the really serious ones and the fun, the charity runners and many of the latter group can be dressed in funny costumes to represent their charity or to stand out from the crowd! The really serious ones are in minimal clothing and ultralightweight running shoes, having trained hard and with special diets.

We are to realise that as Christians we are not in a fun run, but we are on the most serious and important race of all and the finishing line is heaven. The picture here is from the pan-Hellenistic games at Olympia, which was composed of 5 events and the final one was the running event. In our 2nd visit to Kefalonia, Anwen and Daniel came with us and they took a trip to Olympia and walked on the actual Olympia track. Watching a programme on TV one time on Olympia and the force of the authors words "*let us throw*

off everything that hinders...” hit home, as the programme noted that the athletes all competed naked! These athletes let nothing at all weigh down or hinder them in their running and competing! We are told that we are to lay aside, cast off, put away and discard every weight and the sin that so easily hinders - literally skilfully surrounds us and translations include “*which clings so closely*”, “*so easily entangles us*”, “*so easily ensnares us*”.

Modern athletes have the same idea - change out of warm tracksuits and have on the lightest kit and running shoes, especially for a marathon. No serious competitor would run in flippers or climbing boots or even heavy diving boots - although Lloyd Scott ran the 2002 London Marathon dressed in 120lb antique diving suit and crossed the finishing line six days after the event began and holds the world record for the slowest marathon “run”!

As we get set for and are involved in the Christian race, we are to recognise there are things that will hinder us if we try and go on with them weighing us down. Picture it as humorously as you like - with flippers, an inflatable rubber ring, but sadly that is how some Christians add to their struggle, the difficulty of running the Christian race. It is foolish to do so and yet we may be making our Christian life even more difficult by carrying excess weight and letting sin so easily ensnare us. The word translated “weight” or “encumbrance”, NIV = “everything that hinders” is only used in NT once – here! The word means whatever is prominent, protuberance, bulk, mass i.e. weight. This is contrasted with sin and so it seems we can have things clinging on to our lives, are in our lives that in and of themselves are not sinful, not morally wrong. There are many things that can weigh us down and so prevent us running the race as we could or should.

The Puritan John Owen focuses on earthly riches being a great weight - not possessing them, but being possessed by them - our love, desires, actions are controlled by such 1 Timothy 6:9-10 *“People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”* In the parable of the sower, the Lord Jesus speaks of the worries of life and the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22).

We can have the weight of wanting people’s praise and favour, wanting to be popular and this can cause us to desire their praise, acceptance and set that above the praise of the Lord Jesus. We see in John 12:43 some of the leaders of the synagogue believed in Jesus but didn’t show it, for they loved praise from men more than praise from God. We can desire peace, ease and may seek peace at any price, but end up denying Christ. Ambitions may cause us to be distracted from the race and it is a weight that needs to be got rid of. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. God and His ways are to be our consuming desire - as all else is a weight that can hinder us.

We will all need to examine our lives to see the weights that hinder us as individuals – be it additional matters, or we are not as in shape spiritually as we should be. We need to seriously and honestly ask the Lord to show us what hinders us. We are to realise such can hinder our progress in the Christian race and some things we need to be jettisoned, got rid of, even if they are allowable, as they may not be beneficial.

Sin must be got rid of also - sin is doing what God says “No” to and not doing what God says “Yes” to! When we do exercise, we

can get a build-up of lactic acid, especially in high-intensity exercise such as a sprint. When this happens, it reduces the effectiveness of the function of our muscles. Sin affects our spiritual muscles in the race and it hinders our Christian life. Here it so easily besets us, entangles us, clings so closely to us that we are hindered, even end up sprawled on the track in the dirt! Sadly, this sin, like lactic acid, is in us. Sin is still indwelling each and every Christian - no matter how long we have been a Christian, a believer and no matter how much we know or have experienced of God. We read of godly Noah, who walked with God, and he got blind drunk and ended up naked; David was a man after God's own heart and yet he, in his 50s, committed adultery and cold-blooded murder; brave, bold Peter, having seen miracles, even Jesus transfigured, had heard great teaching and yet he so easily denied Jesus before little girls.

Becoming a Christian does not make us isolated from, immune to and incapable of sin and temptation. By our natural nature, there is a magnetic, a gravitational bias and attraction to sin in us and we are powerless to resist it; sin can so easily rule and dominate us. Even when we are converted and made a new creation in Christ, that magnetic, gravitational bias is still there but as Christians we now have the desire and power to resist it, but it is still a battle. Paul felt this in Romans 7:14-20. Sin is not only still abiding in us, but it is still active, still working to bring forth the deeds of the flesh. Sin may lay dormant like a volcano in our lives for some time, but believe me and most importantly believe the word of God, that it will not have lost any of its force to snare, to cling, to cause huge upheavals of heart, life and desires when it so easily and readily becomes active.

To change the picture little bit, we are not to feed our sinful nature, but we are to starve it, we are to mortify it, put it to death. This is

difficult, it is hard and it is such a devastating thing that it can so easily beset us, ensnare us and it clings to us so closely that we feel it is part of us and will never be rid of it.

If we do not lay aside the things that weigh us down and the sin that so easily hinders us, then our Christian life will seem harder, longer and more difficult than it should be. Yet here we are at the start of this chapter and we have seen the witnesses in chapter 11 that declare most clearly that it can be done and we are to get set to go on in the Christian race. As we do so we will have the help, example and encouragement of the Son of God Himself and next week we will note how we are to “Go” looking unto Jesus, fixing our eyes upon Him and considering Him.

What a loving and great God we have, as He will encourage us to keep on going and He Himself is cheering us on, encouraging us not to give up, strengthening us to go and carrying us at times. He even sets before us the One who not only is glorious God, but is perfect man and perfectly understands how we feel and so we can go on as we fix our eyes upon the Lord Jesus in every situation of life that we go through - both the tough and testing times as well as the really encouraging times.