

Olympic Spirituality

“Running with Perseverance”

Hebrews 12:1-3

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on August 21, 2016 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to Hebrews 12.
- As you read the New Testament you will notice that the authors love to use athletic metaphors. These are taken from the ancient Olympic Games. The New Testament writers are calling us to watch the Olympics in Rio with two eyes – one eye that enjoys sports as a good gift of God but a second eye that sees parallels between athletics and living the Christian life.
 - Here in Hebrews 12, for instance, we again see the Christian life pictured as a race. More specifically, Hebrews 12 is about persevering in the race.
- I have been thinking a lot about perseverance lately for two interrelated reasons – one is practical, the other theological. Practically speaking, I have watched far too many people start the Christian race only to drop out or fade away.
 - Some have forsaken Jesus altogether but others just simply stopped running in the sense that they have given their lives to other things. They are more concerned with hobbies, travelling, pleasures, and career achievements than with Jesus and his kingdom.
 - I also see my own need for perseverance because amidst the pain, disappointments, and trials of life I see a desire within myself to retreat and live for myself, for my comfort, pleasure, and ease.
- Young people and older people need to hear about perseverance. Young people heed the life of Demas, Paul’s young protégé. In the letter to the Colossians we find him serving with Paul but later in 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul writes, ***“Demas, because he has loved this world, has deserted me.”*** How sobering.
 - It is not just the young who urgently need to hear of endurance. In fact, the older we get the more we need to hear it because the race wears on us. The lives of David and Moses should sound an alarm bell in our souls, for it was after years of faithfulness that they fell into great sins.
 - Dr. JI Packer, now in his eighties, has written a wonderful little book entitled, “Finishing our course with joy”. In it he says the great temptation of older people is to just relax and live for themselves even when their health and strength are still there. He warns that it is not just how you start but how you finish.
- So I am thinking about perseverance a lot because of all the failing, quitting, and falling I see around me but also because the Bible places such a major emphasis on it. Jesus warned in Matthew 24 that in the last days ***“the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”***
 - Or James 1:12 says, ***“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”***
- The assumption behind these verses is that the Christian life, while filled with joy, is also hard – that it is a marathon that requires tremendous perseverance.

- This theme of perseverance is the specific reason why the book of Hebrews was written. Like so many of us, these Christians were growing weary in the race and in danger of giving up.
- So as we look at this passage today, it is my earnest desire that you, by the grace of God, would persevere to the end. That you would not just start well but would be running even stronger midway, and that you would finish well.
 - So here is the question we will answer this morning: How can we run in such a way that we will persevere to the end? In this passage today see multiple strategies that all enable us to persevere.

STRATEGY #1 – ALL RACES HAVE TIMES OF HARDSHIP

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Strategy #1 - Like the Olympic athlete we must remember that all races have times of hardship.
 - This is so important because many people out there will tell you that if you just become a Christian God will solve all your problems in this life, that he will heal all your diseases, and make you wealthy. The Bible does promise that God will grant his people complete rest in the future but the teaching of the Bible is that this can be hard because it is a race.
 - In verse one we read, **READ 1b - *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*** The word is “*agon*” from which we get our word “*agony*” or “*agonize*.” It came to be used of wrestling matches or running races in the Olympics. It pictures the athlete straining and agonizing to win the race.
- Every athlete knows that during the race there are times when they feel good, when racing is great fun, but every athlete also knows that there are times when the race is hard, when everything in you wants to quit.
 - Friends, if you are a Christian you must understand this. God will fill your life with joy. There will be times when you feel like your feet are flying over the ground. But learn from the athlete. Learn that every race also involves difficult hills, and times of hardship. What keeps you from falling into despair is remembering hardship in a race is normal. Don't be discouraged in the hardship for it is all part of the one race.
 - Like the Olympic athlete we must remember that all races have times of hardship.

STRATEGY #2 – OUR RACE COURSE IS ALREADY MARKED OUT

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Strategy #2 for persevering when the race is hard is this: Like the Olympic athlete, we must remember that our personal racecourses are already marked out.
 - You will never see an Olympic marathoner stop running and say, “*This course is too hard. Clearly we must be on the wrong course here.*”
 - No matter how long and hard the course is the runner never deviates from it because they know that the racecourse has been clearly laid out by the organizers and is the only way to the finish line.

- This is one of the most encouraging things when your racecourse is hard. The one who marked out your course is a gracious God. **READ 1b** - *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*
 - It is our tendency when life is hard to think that God is not leading us the right way. Why would he let my life be so hard? But friends, learn from the Olympians. They know that no matter how hard the course is, it has been marked out and leads to the finish line.
 - God has sovereignly and graciously ordained the racecourse of your life. It is not a mistake. Your racecourse will look very different from others. You may be called to run with great wealth or little; to run with mental illness, a difficult spouse, a rebellious child. But take heart, it is God who has marked out your race and the all-wise God makes no mistakes.

STRATEGY #3 – THINGS THAT IMPEDE FORWARD PROGRESS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Strategy #3 – Like the Olympic athlete, we must rid ourselves of anything that impedes forward progress. **READ 1b** - *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.*
 - There are two things mentioned here which can impede us from running with perseverance – hindrances or weights and sins. But there is a distinction between them. Let's deal first with hindrances or weights.
- Every athlete rids him or her self of any extra weight that would hinder performance such as excess body weight or clothing. For the Christian, hindrances are not necessarily sins but anything, which though morally good, hinders us in some way from living for Jesus.
 - Usain Bolt won the gold medal in the men's 100m for the third straight Olympics. Now imagine Bolt showing up the start line wearing rubber boots and a jacket. The race official says, *"What are you doing?" "I am running"* he replies. *"Wearing that?" "Is there anything in the rules which say I cannot wear this?" "Well, no." "Then there is nothing wrong with it is there?"* I am sure the official would say, *"Well, no there is nothing technically wrong with it but it is just all wrong."*
 - Now this is of course ridiculous but this is exactly the attitude we so often take. So often the only question Christians ask is, *"Is it sin?"* If the answer is 'no' then it must be fine. But the really question we must ask is, *"Does this weigh me down so that I cannot keep straining forward in knowing Christ and serving Christ?"*
- What are some examples of morally good things that can hinder us? You name it and it can hinder you. Nothing wrong with watching T.V. but if it dominates your life so you don't have time for reading the Bible or prayer or your family it is a weight. Nothing wrong with hobbies but if they consume you so that you have no time to serve then it is a weight.
 - Do you see what the Olympians are teaching us? The question we must ask is not, simply *"is it wrong or sinful?"* The question is, *"Does this in any way hinder me from making forward progress in the race?"*

- May I encourage you to sit down with a pen and paper and write out things that hinder you from running? Many of these things do not need to be removed from your life – they simply need to be put in their proper place so that Jesus is your greatest love.
- And then there are sins that entangle us. We all have sins that we are prone towards – sins which entangle us and keep us from running. What are yours? Lust? Pride? Jealousy? Envy? Greed? Impatience? Anger? Laziness? Judgmentalism? Throw it off. Get rid of it. Do not make peace with it. Throw it off so that you can run.
 - So that is the third strategy: if you are going to run with perseverance, rid yourself of anything that impedes forward progress.

STRATEGY #4 – LISTEN TO THE SHOUTS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Strategy #4: Like the Olympic athlete, we must listen to the shouts of encouragement. **READ 1a** - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*
 - Clearly the witnesses are all those in chapter 11 – the heroes of the faith who went before us. They are a vast number, a cloud that surrounds us. Now this word “*witness*” can have two meanings. It can refer to an act of seeing such as “*I witnessed the race today*” or it can be an act of telling, “*Let me tell you about what took place.*” So is this verse saying that they watch us as spectators, or is it saying that they are trying to tell us something?
 - I, and almost every commentator, take it to be the latter – they are telling us something. Why do I think that?
- The word witness is used 5 times in chapter 11 and in every case it is a telling, not a seeing. The greatest example is Abel in 11:4. Turn there. **READ 4** - *By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.* So even though Abel is dead his act of faith thousands of years ago still speaks to us.
 - The picture then is like this. The saints of history have finished the race and are now standing on the sidelines cheering you on as you run. How do they do this? When you read or hear how they persevered by faith.
 - There is Noah saying, “*You are discouraged because people mock you for being a Christian. They jeered at me for decades as I built the ark but in faith I did it. Keep running.*”
 - There is Joshua – “*The task ahead of you seems impossible but God is faithful, he will knock the walls of Jericho down. Keep running by faith.*”
 - There is Moses saying, “*The world is tempting you with its promises of pleasure but by faith I chose against the riches and pleasures of this world that I might gain eternal reward. You can do it to as you trust God.*”
 - There is Joseph - “*I know you are tempted right now to commit adultery. I was too, but did not do it. Keep running.*”

- Why is Hebrews 11 in the Bible? For you when you are discouraged or feel like you cannot go on; to inspire you to persevere as you hear of person after person who by faith they entrusted themselves to God and by this persevered and finished the race.
 - Hearing of how God worked in history inspires our faith. So read your Bible. I would recommend a little series of books by John Piper entitled “The swan are not silent”. Each book has about three biographies in it and then Piper gives reflections on the person’s life.

STRATEGY #5 – KEEP OUR EYES FOCUSED ON THE GOAL

- So if you are going to persevere in this race when it is hard you must learn from the athletes: remember that all races have times of hardship. Remember that God has graciously marked out your racecourse. Rid your self of anything that impeded forward progress and listen to the shouts of encouragement.
 - Strategy #5: **(SHOW SLIDE)** Like the Olympic athlete, we must keep our eyes focused on the goal. **READ 2a** - *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.*
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** On May 6, 1954 Roger Bannister did what most believed up to that time was a physical impossibility for human beings - he ran a mile in under four minutes – 3:59:40. But within 2 months, John Landy eclipsed Bannister’s new record by 1.4 seconds.
 - On August 7, 1954, the two met together in Vancouver for the British Empire Games. This historic race would settle who was the world’s fastest miler. In the first three laps Landy surged into the lead with Bannister content to remain a few yards behind. As they moved into the last corner, a dramatic finish occurred. Landy was haunted by one question, ***“Where is Bannister?”*** In one simultaneous moment, the crowd of 35,000 leapt to its feet, Landy turned to look over his left shoulder, and Bannister flashed by him on his right to take the race in 3:58:80.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE)** Landy later said these words to a *TIME* magazine reporter: ***“If I hadn’t looked back, I would have won!”***



- Do you want to persevere to the end? Then keep your eyes on one thing – more accurately on one person. Like an athlete looking to the finish line, let nothing remove him from your sight. Why? He is the author of your faith – the one who bought your salvation. He is only one who can perfect it – as Paul said, ***“He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion”*** (Phil 1:6).
 - You are called to persevere but only he can give you the grace to do it. This is the key to running strong at the beginning, middle and end of your race. You must bend all your life on making sure Jesus is ever before your eyes. But how do you do that?

HOW TO LOOK TO JESUS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, look *backward* at his life, death, and resurrection.
 - Look first at His life. **READ 3** - ***Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*** What keeps us from losing heart when the race is beating us down? Looking at the *life* of Jesus who suffered infinitely more than any of us ever will. Look to his life.
 - And then look always to His death and resurrection. **READ 2b** - ***who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.*** As you try to run you will ever be reminded of your sins. What will you do when as you look over your life you see so many sins? There is only one thing – look to Jesus – to his death and resurrection.
 - At the cross you see the eternal Son of God dying to pay your soul’s debt. In His resurrection you have rock solid proof that God accepts all that His Son has done on your behalf. The only remedy for the bitterness of sin is the sweetness of what Jesus did on your behalf. Look backward at his life, death, and resurrection.

- The second way you fix your eyes on Jesus that you might run with perseverance when the race is hard is to **(SHOW SLIDE)** Look *upward* to see His present work on our behalf.
 - Look at the end of verse 2. **READ 2b** - *and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* He sat down. And what is Jesus doing now before God? Hebrews 7:25: *“Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”*
 - Jesus’ work on your behalf is not done yet. As your representative, as your Great High Priest, Jesus ever lives and intercedes for you. As you struggle through the race, He continually pleads your cause before God. He ever asks for the grace you need for today, the comfort you need in trial, the ability to put aside those hindrances and sins. Look upward to see his present work on your behalf.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, look *forward* to his coming again.
 - What do you get from looking to his second coming? From reading over and over the texts on his return? Hope. The race is hard but it will end. Great hope fills the discouraged and weary soul as we see Him setting up his eternal kingdom and ushering his faithful servants in.
 - We must keep our eyes focused on the goal.

STRATEGY #6 – CONSIDER FUTURE JOY NOT PRESENT LOSS

- There is one more strategy here that will encourage you to run when life is hard. **(SHOW SLIDE)** Strategy #6: Like the Olympic athlete, we must consider the future rewards not the present losses.
 - How do all of these athletes persevere when the pain is great? By thinking of the joy at the finish line. What kept Jesus from giving up in Gethsemane? What kept Jesus persevering when they flogged him 39 times with the cat of nine tails? What kept him from saying, *“I quit”* on the cross?
 - What kept Jesus running? **READ 2** - *the joy that was set before him endured the cross.* Future joy.
- What was that joy? The future reward of his pain. What was the reward? Seeing people from every tribe, nation, and tongue purchased back to God. Seeing all those whom the Father had given Him, redeemed by His work. Seeing you and me, undeserving sinners inheriting eternal life and joy with Him and His Father. Seeing His Father glorified and exalted for his grace.
 - For this joy, Jesus lost everything. It was loss to give up his glory and become a man. Loss to not be worshipped as he deserved. Loss to be scorned. Loss to be crucified in the shame of a common criminal. Loss to have the Father forsake Him. But he preserved through the losses because he kept the future reward ever before his eyes and the reward outweighed the loss.
- How about you? Does giving up those hindrances seem like loss? Does giving up that sin feel like loss? Does re-arranging your whole life’s priorities seem like loss? Does giving your money seem like loss? Does having people scorn you because of Christ seem like loss? Does following God in sexuality seem like loss?

- Learn from the athlete. Friends, when, by the grace of God you persevere through all the hills and trials of your race, you will enter the gates of heaven to the thundering applause of those who ran before you. You will stand before the maker of heaven and Earth and He himself will put the medal around your neck and say, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant. Come and share your master’s happiness.”*** On that day nothing will be loss – it will all be gain.
 - You will gain everything. Eighty years of hardship will be but a pin-prick of pain compared to eight billion eons of joy. ***“Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”***

CONCLUSION

- So I say to you who are discouraged – never give up. To you who have become ensnared by sin – throw it off. To you who are hindered – remove it. Look to Jesus – the only one who can perfect your faith. Look to the Saviour and see that the present losses cannot compare with the glory that will be revealed.