

Running the Race of Life

Hebrews 12: 1-3

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In just a few days the games of the Thirty-third Olympiad will be held in Paris, France, July 26 through August 11. It will be the third time that France has hosted the Olympics. They were held in Paris in 1900 and then again 1924. The award winning film, *Chariots of Fire*, was based upon the 1924 Olympics, featuring two runners, one a Jewish sprinter and the other a Scottish Christian runner who went on to be a missionary to China. This year's games will feature not only the city of Paris, but also sixteen other French cities. Additionally, at least one event will be held in the South Pacific on the island of Tahiti in French Polynesia. All things considered, the Olympic games this summer should be spectacular, watched by millions and millions of people around the globe. Thinking about this upcoming athletic competition, I could not help but be reminded of the passage of Scripture that was read just a few moments ago, especially verses one and two in the twelfth chapter of the book of Hebrews.

Speaking of this somewhat mysterious book in the New Testament, we are unsure as to who wrote it. No one is identified as its author. Some think the author was Paul. Others, including the seminary professor under whom I studied this book, thought the writer was Apollos, an evangelist from Egypt who was well versed in the Jewish way of life as recorded in the Old Testament. Throughout its thirteen chapters numerous references to Old Testament worship practices are mentioned. Nevertheless, whoever wrote the book of Hebrews, he was inspired by God and offers in these three verses important insights that are not only reflective of what will be transpiring at the Olympics in a few days, but also directly and personally applicable to our own lives as Christians. Let's see what this brief passage of Scripture has to say to us today.

Verse one begins by reminding us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Who are these people? Like a huge colosseum that can seat thousands of people for athletic contests here on earth, the writer of Hebrews suggests that there is a great grandstand in glory filled with the saints down through the ages. Sitting in that grandstand are people like Moses and Elijah, Amos and Hosea as well as saints throughout the ages such as Saint Francis and Patrick of Ireland. In addition, there are countless multitudes of believers down through the centuries, some of whom may even be relatives and friends whom you have known not so long ago. Here's

what they are doing. Like modern day fans they are cheering for their team and guess who's playing on that team? If you don't know, let me tell you. It's you and me. Because we are the athletes who are playing on God's team. We're playing on the field of life and we're facing opponents who are well trained and fiercely competitive. So let's find out what we need to do to be winners.

Here's the first thing. Dress down! Have you ever watched a game in which children have to put on and then take off a lot of extra, baggy clothing as they participate in a relay race? It's a hoot with the kids falling all over themselves as they try to win the contest. The Olympics are just the opposite. If anything, the athletes are wearing outfits that are sometimes on the verge of being too revealing. They are light and form fitting. Those competing in the games do not want to wear anything that will get in the way of their performance. For that very reason, here is what the writer of Hebrews tells us, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1). What are some of the things that can get us all tangled up—debt, work, possessions, social media? A person head over heels in debt can't give much to the Lord or spend much time serving Him while working eighty hours a week. An abundance of possessions can also get in the way and how about all the time we spend viewing and participating in social media? For kids it has been estimated at five hours a day. I suspect adults are not far behind. Here's what Paul had to say, "You were taught with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). This means getting rid of those things that are slowing us down, dragging us into a wasteful and sinful way of life. Like an Olympian athlete, you need to dress down.

Here's the second thing. We need to run hard. The writer of Hebrews expresses it this way, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). Olympian athletes give it their all and God's people need to do the same. Christianity is not a spectator sport. It requires doing and being our best. When we stumble, it means getting back up and continuing to run, even though it's hard and we are hurting. Do you remember the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain? A British athlete, Derek Redmond, was competing in the 400 meter race. He had been plagued with multiple injuries during his Olympic career. Nevertheless, Derek was determined to compete and he was one of the fastest runners in that event. He started strong, but just after crossing the halfway mark, he grabbed the back of his right thigh. He had torn his hamstring. Even though he was grimacing in pain, he did not give up. He continued onward, hopping on one leg. He was determined to cross the finish line. The crowd stood to their

feet and began cheering him on. Then something marvelous took place. Derek's father ran out onto the field, embraced his son and together they crossed the finish line. For us as Christians perseverance is the name of the game, fighting through the challenges and the difficulties that confront us. When we do, we have One who stands beside us, helping us to finish the race. Not giving up, crossing the finish line is what it's all about. As we are reminded in James' letter to fellow believers, "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" (James 1:12).

Finally, we must not only run hard, but we must watch the coach. Hebrews 12:2 states, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Any good athlete will tell you that watching and paying attention to the coach is the key to success. John Wooden was probably one of if not the greatest basketball coach of all time. His teams at UCLA won ten national NCAA championships in twelve years, a feat unequalled in the annals of basketball history. How did he do that? He was a great basketball player himself and a rigorous student of the game he coached. He lived and knew the game of basketball. He was also a role model for the players he coached, teaching his teams not only how to play basketball but how to live. He stated on one occasion, "I have always tried to make it clear that basketball is not the ultimate. It is of small importance in comparison to the total life we live. There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior." Like John Wooten, we too have a coach, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to keep our eyes on Him, receiving His wisdom and guidance as we play the game of everyday living. After all He too played the game of life right here among us as a human being. He showed us how to live in the here and now and how to be assured that we will be standing on the winners podium at the award ceremony in heaven. Writing to Christians in the ancient city of Philippi, Paul delivered this word of encouragement to his fellow believers, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). In other words, we are to follow the example that Jesus lived before us and make it a part of our own lives. Or to express this thought in athletic language, "Watch the coach."

Here's one final thought. Every four years the Olympic Games have their origin at Mount Olympus in Greece. The Olympic Torch is lit at that location and then carried by runners to the sight of the Olympic Games. The Olympic flame must be kept alive by those who carry it. Over hill and dale, through water and high mountains it is carried relentlessly and courageously by a team of runners to its final destination. We too are a part of a team of runners, a team of Christ's followers who have been carrying the torch of

God's light and love for nearly two thousand years. Like those Olympic runners, we too must not fail in our mission. We must hold up the light of Christ through all kinds of adversity and dangers. We must not allow the encumbrances of the world to weigh us down, we must not grow tired and weary, we must keep our eyes focused on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. We must run and run hard until we pass the torch of Christianity to those who will lift it high and carry it triumphantly onward.