

Introduction

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by
so great a cloud of witnesses,
let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which
clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance
the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus the pioneer 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.*
Hebrews 12:1,2

At the beginning of the long-distance race the runners are fresh and eager. Toward the end they are fatigued and dehydrated; yet because the finish is in sight (it is a triumph just to *finish*) they can summon up a little more for the last half-mile. But in the middle of the long-distance race it's another matter: the wind always seems to be in their face, the rain is cold, and the stray dog looks lethal. It's in the middle of the race that discouragement will undo runners more surely than cramps or soreness.

Discouragement is always telling. It saps strength faster than anything else. Long-distance runners are aware too that downfalls can be engineered by another runner; a rival can be "broken" psychologically, and most likely on a sharp incline. Imagine a runner confidently leading in a race as he approaches an uphill. He has always regarded himself a strong uphill runner. Unknown to him another runner has been lying back, saving strength, waiting for the moment when he can blow by the first fellow *going uphill*. He runs past the confident leader precisely at that stretch of the race the unsuspecting strider has always considered his strength. As the latter watches his rival blow by he is blown away. Confidence gone, the only thing left is discouragement. And discouragement is deadly.

The book of Hebrews speaks of the Christian life as a long-distance trek. Christ's people are not sprinters who "get it all over with" in ten seconds. Sprint races end so quickly that no one has time to get down. But the long haul is different. It's so very long that it is difficult not to get downcast. Nonetheless, discouragement is especially deadly in the Christian life. And if it descends upon us just when we think we're at our point of greatest strength, its deadliness is indescribable.

When we do become discouraged we review our situation and tell ourselves that anyone would get downcast in these circumstances. Disappointment, frustration, betrayal, unforeseen potholes and pitfalls and pit-bulls: who *wouldn't* become downhearted in the face of all these? Therefore our discouragement is as excusable as it is understandable.

"Not so!" shouts the unnamed author of Hebrews.

"Understandable, yes; excusable, no. What could be the excuse?" Then in Hebrews 12:3 this writer points us to what will always render our discouragement inexcusable. "Consider him, Jesus, who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted." Or as J.B. Phillips puts it in his splendid paraphrase, "Think constantly of enduring all that sinful men could say against him, and *you will not lose your purpose or your courage.*"

Daily discouragement leaks over us that poison gas which settles upon us and soaks into us. We become disheartened in our faith-marathon inasmuch as being a Christian doesn't make the world any less difficult or formidable; it doesn't provide that puff of magic which turns obstacle-course into super highway. We become discouraged over spiritual leaders who turn out to have clay feet. We become discouraged by the institutional malaise of whatever denomination we belong to, and discouraged again by fellow-parishioners. Perhaps we are dismayed at ourselves most of all. We think we're making progress toward Christian maturity (discipleship is really a "breeze")—until we meet our first test. Our reaction leaves us feeling shocked that we appear to have made no progress at all; we begin asking ourselves if we are Christian in any sense. Discouragement concerning ourselves—the worst kind—can paralyze instantly.

Like a disease that renders sufferers vulnerable to worse diseases, discouragement can soon beget bitterness. Yet in the same chapter that speaks of the Christian life as a race the book of Hebrews suddenly

warns us: "See to it that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble and by it the many defiled."

Then what keeps Christ's people in the race? What keeps us all going when the long distance race seems entirely too long? We are to "keep looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." As *pioneer* of our faith our Lord has run the race ahead of us. He has scouted the territory, blazed the trail. As arduous and obstacle-ridden as the cross-country course is, then, it can't be impossible! As *perfecter* of our faith he will invigorate and make even more resilient the faith we have now, regardless of how fear-ridden, doubt-riddled, or discouragement-threatened it seems to be.

Lest we *still* have difficulty believing it possible for *us* to get through the race we must understand that we're surrounded by a vast crowd of fellow-strugglers who have already made it through. "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses," our author insists. The witnesses are fellow-strugglers and fellow-believers who came before us, kept their eye on the goal, kept looking unto Jesus, and now have finished the long-distance race. Having finished ahead of us, however, they haven't disappeared. Instead they have remained at the finish-line in order to encourage us.

The book of Hebrews lists some of these people: Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Barak, Samson, Rahab. But of course the "great cloud" never gets smaller; each generation adds to it, swelling it with names written forever in the Book of Life. Wesley, Newton, Booth, Wilberforce, Stringfellow: all found in their Lord a race-long resistance to discouragement, and therefore all are now urging us not to slacken, droop or quit!

The long distance race we run, Hebrews tells us, is a *relay* race. Each generation of believers passes the baton onto the next. (It's a peculiar relay race, remember, as those who have already run their leg of it go to the finish line in order to cheer on those who are still running.) The one thing we *mustn't* do is fumble the baton. In a telecast of the last Olympic Games two women were running stride for stride in a relay event (four times four hundred metres) when suddenly one jabbed the other with a sharp elbow. The elbowed woman, in pain now, gasped and slowed up slightly; whereupon the nasty runner surged ahead; whereupon the victimized woman lost her temper and threw her baton at the woman who had fouled her. As soon as she

threw her baton she threw the race away; she disqualified herself and her team. It all happened because she allowed a sharp jab to deflect her from running “with perseverance.”

We are always to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” We must *never* allow unforeseeable jabs to deflect us. When we are jabbed (more often it seems we have been mugged!) we must never find ourselves “losing it.” It won’t do to protest, “But I was fouled!” Of course we were. Who isn’t? That’s why we are all to “run with perseverance.”

Those who have already persevered urge us to do no less; these men and women alike endured more than a little hostility. Then we too must keep on looking unto him who endured hostility against himself, for we don’t want to lose our purpose or our courage. As we look to him we see as well the great cloud of witnesses—fellow-believers who have run before us and have proven that our Lord will see us to the finish-line, see us to his waiting arms, see us home.

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