

**August 22, 2010**  
**Pentecost 13**

*"Heroes of Faith Are Cheering for Us As We Run Our Race for Jesus"*

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## **HEBREWS 12:1-13**

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**T**herefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. <sup>4</sup> In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, <sup>6</sup> because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." <sup>7</sup> Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? <sup>8</sup> If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. <sup>9</sup> Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! <sup>10</sup> Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. <sup>13</sup> "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Have you ever seen a track meet where the crowd cheers on a runner? In the 2008 Olympic Trials in Eugene, Oregon a 16 year old girl from Arroyo Grande electrified the crowd when she surged forward at the end of the 1500 meter race to qualify for the finals. Her name is Jordan Hasay. With her small body and long flowing blond hair, she set a new high school record that day. The people from Eugene who know their track and field even chanted loudly in unison, "Come to Oregon. Come to Oregon." Jordan went to Oregon. She just completed her freshman year as an Oregon duck where she excels in long distant races. The crowds continue to cheer her every performance.

The words just read to you from Hebrews 12 picture your life on this earth as race that is run for Jesus. You do not run this race to earn a place in heaven. You run this race because heaven is already yours. There is even a crowd cheering you on, a great cloud of witnesses, the heroes of faith who have run the race before you. Included in this crowd are names like Abraham, and Paul, and Lorenz and Don and Carl, people we love who have run the race before us. This great cloud of witnesses keeps cheering us on and telling us it is all worth it. They keep reminding us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we run this race. They keep reminding that all the training and agony that goes with running this race is worth every minute because we are able to bring glory to Jesus and his work for our salvation.

## **They cheer for us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus**

When the runners line up for the race, they take off their warm up jackets and warm up pants to run the race with as little clothing as possible. If we want to run our race for Jesus, we cannot allow ourselves to become entangled by sin. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Ephesians 4:22 tells us "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off the old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires." How can I run this race for Jesus if I don't take off the sinful ways of the past and get rid of them? We are privileged to run a race that has been marked out for us. Our heavenly Father has a plan for you and me. He wants us to live our lives to glorify him according to his plan. God's ways are always the best ways. That is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done."

This great cloud of witnesses surrounds us and cheers us on. They know that the race will not be easy. One of the greatest runners who went before us, the Apostle Paul, told us how tough it would be when he wrote, "For I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-this I keep on doing."

This race is tough. We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. "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." We fix our eyes on Jesus because of how he ran the race for us. If my hope of being accepted by God and loved by God depends on how well I have run the race of life, then my situation is hopeless. Then I want to quit the race and sit down and cry, because I have no hope. Usually it is not good to look back when you run a race, but in this race to honor Jesus, we keep looking back at how he ran the race for us. We see him with joy on his face as he looks forward to taking our sin upon himself and enduring the same of the cross and the punishment for our sin.

As we run this race we also look up and see Jesus sitting on the right hand of God. Look at him. He is sitting next to the Father in glory, because all the work of saving us is completed. It is finished. The race to earn eternal life has been accomplished for us. In Colossians 3 we are told, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is also seated at the right hand of God." When I look up I see myself there with Jesus at the Father's side reigning with him in glory.

As we run this race we also look forward to what is coming in the future. With our eyes fixed on Jesus we can look forward to hearing him joyfully say to us, "Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Paul looked forward to the outcome of his race with these words: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me, and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

Will this race be easy for you and me? You know the answer to that question. Imagine running a race in front of a hostile crowd. Instead of being cheered, you are jeered. Rotten eggs and rotten tomatoes are thrown at you. People spit on you and curse you as you pass by. And I ask you what is worse? Is it the verbal abuse or the subtle disdain? They may not tell you verbally that they don't like the way you are running your race to honor Jesus, but you know what they are thinking. Then think of Jesus. We are told, "Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." All these great saints of the past, the heroes of faith, the cloud of witnesses, people we love who died in the arms of Jesus, they keep tell us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

### **They cheer for us in our struggle with sin**

These great heroes of the past also had their struggles with sin. They cheer us on and tell us not to get discouraged when the Lord disciplines and trains us to run a better race for our Savior. We are told, "In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." How many drops of blood have you shed for the name of Jesus? The Apostle Paul certainly shed some blood for the name of Jesus. Paul, take off your shirt. Let us see your scars. We gasp in horror from the multiple different beatings he endured for the name of Jesus. The Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand was called to testify before the US Congress about the beatings Christians experienced in then communist Romania. One congressman questioned whether Wurmbrand was exaggerating the situation and overstating the case about communism and its dangers. The Lutheran pastor then took off his shirt and showed his back with the scars from multiple beatings he endured while in prison for his Christian faith.

The Greek word used here for struggle is the word, "agonizo" from which we get our English word agony. When Jesus prayed in the Garden his agony was so great his sweat fell to the ground as great drops of blood. There is a book and a movie about the life of the artist Michelangelo called, "The Agony and the Ecstasy." It describes in detail how hard it was to create in fresco, wet colored plaster, the beautiful Sistine Chapel. There was the agony of painting the ceiling over a period of 25 years. Then there was the ecstasy or joy of seeing the finished product. It stands today as one of the greatest works of art ever produced by a human being. Your life on this earth is like a painting that glorifies God, and each brush stroke comes with this agonizing struggle against this sin that so easily entangles us.

If the great saints of the past would have a word to speak to us today, they would cheer us on and tell us not to be worried about the way the Lord will train us in the school of hard knocks. The hardest part of this race is not the mountains we have to climb, but the sand that gets in our shoes. So we are told, "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'"

Oh, my dear Christian, you are God's dear child, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, a child of the light not of the darkness. Would our loving heavenly Father not discipline us, the way a mother or father disciplines a child? This section of Hebrews reminds us that God treats us like sons and daughters not as children who do not belong to him. The little boy kicks the ball and it goes out into the street. His first inclination is to run after the ball. But he does not go out into the street because his mother and father have disciplined him and trained him not to go in the street where a car might hit him. It says here that we respected our fathers when they disciplined us. That discipline was not always perfect. Not so with our heavenly Father. It says that he "disciplines us for our good."

What is our loving Father in heaven going to do with us when he sees us trying to run our race while we are getting entangled in some sin? He will discipline us. His primary way of doing that is to come into our lives with his Word and show us where we are wrong. He punishes us with his law to show us where we are wrong and lead us to repentance. Let me give you a personal example of how this happens. This past week I was reading in my personal devotions from Matthew 12 where Jesus says, "But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words, you will be condemned." How many words have I spoken in my life on this earth that were not as loving and caring as they should have been? How many times have I allowed words to come out of my mouth full of grumbling and complaining instead of thanking God for all the blessings he has so abundantly provided? Great saints of the past would confess that they are no better than I am. God uses his Word to discipline us and keep us from being entangled by sin. He disciplines us so that we run our race saying over and over again, "I need to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus."

This great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on. They remind us that the discipline we receive from God's Word is all worth it because of the harvest of righteousness that comes forth in our lives. Dear Christian, we have a race to run this week. We know the victory is already ours in Jesus. We know the struggle is worth it because we get to glory the name of Jesus and his salvation in all that we do. Amen.