

Sermon 1817

Hebrews 12.1-13

August 14, 2022

Because of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, we are learning a few things. Shiny weapons don't win wars. Boots on the ground, bullets in the gun and food in the belly win wars. Amateurs talk strategy, experts talk logistics. We could learn the same lessons watching each year's crop of rookies (it doesn't matter what sport, the lessons are always the same). Everybody wants to win. Winners want to practice.

So if we think matters of faith are ivory tower topics with no connection to our daily lives, we are sorely mistaken. Don't predict the tanks will be in Kiev in three days. Don't boast to the sportswriters that the defense will split before you because you hold the Georgia Bulldog rushing record. Nose to the grindstone. Do the hard work. Day in and day out, in season and out of season, be in

Training to Win the Race

1. Saints have gone before us (1-3).
2. Our heavenly Father goes with us (4-11).
3. Bring along others (12-13).

"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. 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. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (1-4)."

Let's drop the notion that this section of Scripture teaches us those in heaven are watching us, like fans in a football stadium are glued to the action on the field. Yes, the ancient racetracks of Rome had images of their gods watching the action, but those demons had nothing better to do. What the holy writer is describing is a witness for us who are contending. They don't fix their eyes on us. We are to fix our eyes on them. Fix our eyes on Jesus. Look at the outcome of his life, how he is seated in glory despite the opposition of sinful men. It is no different than a football stadium festooning the upper deck with the numbers of the retired stars of yesteryear. There's Bart Starr's number! There's Fuzzy Thurston's number! Unforgettable. Live up to their reputation! Oh, there's Brent Favre. You get my point.

When we are training to win the race we remember saints have gone before us. The task is not impossible. It can be done.

Now, let's look at the role of Jesus in this discussion. The writer has already mentioned the "sin that so easily entangles." If we missed it, he is saying we have sinned. It's unavoidable. A curse word flew out of our mouth. An ungenerous thought arose in our mind. Our heart saw something and wanted what it wanted.

We have been lazy and have tried to cut corners. We wanted to hoist the MVP trophy before we even got the invite to try out for the team.

That's why Jesus is the "author and perfecter of our faith." Those who are not willing to train to win the race are hopeless. They have nothing but bad attitude to contribute to the team. That's why Jesus came with his godly attitude, his perfect attitude. The prophet predicted the Savior's thoughts, "To do your will, O Lord, is my delight." "Not my will, but your will be done," Jesus the Savior prayed. At the end he laid down his perfect life to suffer the punishment for all the bad attitude we had displayed as we mucked up God's game plan from start to finish. The cross is the path to heaven. In that rugged cross we find an answer to sin in God's forgiveness. Jesus has made every one of us God's MVP.

But the writer focuses rather on Jesus' suffering, a suffering we must share as we train to win the race. He endured the cross. He scorned its shame. He endured opposition from sinful men. And look where he is now—in glory at the right hand of God. That is the finish line for you and me. It can be done. Saints of old have done it. Think of the persecution Jeremiah suffered. Think of Daniel in the lions' den. Jesus has done it. We can persevere. Our number will hang in that stadium one day.

We are in training to win the race. Our heavenly Father goes with us.

The trouble with legends is that they are kind of far away. They are mere mortals, probably already dead and gone. The only inspiration they can arouse in us is the kind we work up inside ourselves as we remember them. But there is another in our life. Some have even compared him to a coach. He is our heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father goes with us.

"Endure hardship as discipline. God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father. God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness (7, 10)."

Our life is hard because we are in training to win the race. Our heavenly Father makes sure we train hard. What, after all, is training? It is force applied to an opposing force. I want my muscles to get stronger. I lift weights against the force of gravity. The work is done when I lift them up against gravity, not when I put them down. In team sports the opposition is the force trying to stop or impede the offense. There's always a defense, even in practice. Every play works if there are no X's on the coach's white board.

The fact that our life is hard, that we are facing opposition, it is not proof that we are not doing something right. It is not proof that we are not Christians. It is proof that we are doing something right. It proves that we are children of God. Fathers discipline their own children. What the lay-about down the street does—I have no right to interfere with that family's business. What my own children are up to—that concerns me and I step in.

Our heavenly Father doesn't step into our life, staging an intervention here, a timeout there. Our heavenly Father goes with us. Everybody ever in the military knows the boot camp drill sergeant runs the same miles and does the same exercises, as the newbies. There would be mutiny if he demanded the impossible from his vacation home in the Bahamas. Our heavenly Father goes with us and gives us the right mix of sunshine and rain, hard days and pleasant rest periods. Behind it all he is making sure we are tough, tough enough for the days we have to face now and tough enough to face the greatest of tests in the future. Teams don't train to win the Super Bowl. They train to win next Sunday's game and the Sunday after that and the Sunday after that. Along the way they may develop that extra something, grit, strength, insight, unity, to make it to the top. You can't develop that the last two weeks before the big game. And at every step of our training God brings out Christian virtues and strengths that not only will get us through tomorrow, but will keep us thwarting the devil's schemes right up to the day we die. No, it's not easy. No one likes to work hard and this is hard work. No one volunteers for disciplines. But that discipline from our heavenly Father, that perfect training individualized just for us, will make us win the race.

Training to win the race. It would be so American of me to finish here. You see, we celebrate the individual to the point of idolatry. It's as if we gave birth to ourselves, were self-educated and created the lives we live by clawing it out of the unbroken desert sand. Even though I am an American, I have to go by what the Bible says. It says, "Bring others along."

"Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed (12-13)."

Others can be winners. The race isn't only for one. I suppose marathon runners understand this. Everybody who crosses the finish line wins. They compete and complete the race. But our focus on the winner at all costs doesn't allow that. In fact, far from instilling life lessons, big-time sports corrupts life. When you are injured or too old, you are released. If sports were the role model for America we'd have no Social Security worries. We'd just take everyone who turned 65 out into the desert and shoot them! Sick? Well, we have somebody just as capable to replace you. Oh, and by the way, the health insurance you used to get from your job is cancelled. Let's not make sports our god.

Our God, our heavenly Father, tells us to bring others along. The church has long been viewed as a hospital, a lifeboat. Here the broken, the ailing, the sin-sick come to seek heavenly treatment. Rather than imposing heavy burdens of guilt and shame, disabling the lame, the holy writer calls it, we remove those burdens by the forgiveness that comes from the cross. Here all can find the Savior and in his arms, find a home. If the congregation is only for the successful and healthy, well, it is not the house of the God of the Bible. The wise give thought to what they do. The strong make things easier for the weak. The two hands we've been given aren't for

patting ourselves on the back, but for lifting up others and steadying them. Our victory is only complete when every Christian has crossed the finish line.

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Hard work. That's what our Lord is promising us. No shortcuts. He's not singling us out. Every believer must take the hard path. The devil, the world and our sinful nature will not let us rest along that path as they try to stop us at every step of the way. But only this path leads to glory. Only on this path does our God strengthen us and bestow an honor that will never fade. Let's go. Leave the braggarts and desperate despots in the dust.