

29. The Author and Finisher

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I've never considered myself as a good athlete. I wasn't good at running or any sport that requires throwing or catching balls. When I play a basketball game, if I can hit the backboard behind the basket, I get excited.

But there are two types of sports I like and am a halfway decent: martial arts and shooting. While I was a senior high school kid in Seoul, South Korea, I was attending a "Summer Sweat Camp" so that I could achieve a black belt in Judo. In South Korea at that time, we didn't have an air conditioning system in the gym. So when our Judo coach called it "Sweat Camp," he meant it and you smelled it.

We were practicing throw techniques and counter-throw techniques, as well as trips and counter-trip techniques until they became a part of our nature. By the time the camp was over, my ankles were swollen from trips and counter-trip techniques. Additionally, my sides were bruised from breaking falls uncountable times. Because I was determined to get a black belt, I endured it. I sacrificed my comfort for the goal I set.

It is a nice thing to set a goal and work hard to achieve it. But it is far more important for us to achieve something that is worthwhile for eternity. Since we learned about the great spiritual heroes of the Bible for over a month and a half, it is time for us to put what we learned into the practical area.

In chapter 12 of the Book of Hebrews, the author encourages the Hebrew readers to endure to the end and win the prize. First, he makes an illustration of race in v1 through 13; then, he emphasizes our citizenship in the heavenly city in v14 through 29.

In this study, we will meet the ultimate example of our faith in God, our Lord Jesus Christ whom we should imitate, because He is the Author and Finisher of our faith.

A. THE PREPARATION FOR THE RACE

Hebrews 12:1a Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us,

Becoming a believer of Jesus Christ has the greatest perks in the universe. First, we get to be our God the Father's adopted children; second, we get to go to heaven at the expense of our Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross. I am sure that there are many more perks. But it also tells us that we will encounter pain, heartache, sickness, sorrow, pressure, hardship, and even death.

Jesus has never promised to us a rose garden, nor did He ever say to us that we will not experience trouble in our Christian life. As a matter of fact, He plainly told us that we will have tribulation:

John 16:33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Some naive believers or those who were taught with wrong theologies think that the Christian life is some sort of easy hopscotch game. Actually, it is a hard-fought

tough-minded race. The Greek word for 'race' is "agona", from which we get the word "agony." When we see an excellent runner winning a race much faster than his competitors, it looks so easy. But we don't realize how much agony he had to endure during his training to become that good.

When I was a baby Christian, I read a book by a Bible teacher who was involved in the Word of Faith movement which teaches the Prosperity Gospel heresy. He supposedly went to heaven when he was a kid and got a personal tour from Jesus Himself. In one portion of his book, he wrote, "There was a gigantic bleacher where many believers who went to heaven sit, watch us, and cheer for us who are on the earth." At that time, I didn't know much about the Bible, but somehow in my heart, the Holy Spirit told me that it is not correct. So I stopped reading that book and I filed it in the round folder – a.k.a. waste basket.

I believe that here is a proper explanation for this verse: The Greek word for 'witness' is "martus". We get our English word "martyr" from this word and the proper definition is "witness," not "spectator." Besides, the original Greek word's tense is used in the former sense. Then, someone would ask, "But how are you going to explain, "surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"?" I strongly believe that those witnesses whom we studied in the previous chapter 11 have finished their course and handed in their baton are watching and encouraging their successors in this relay race at the finish line, not on the stadium bleacher.

The author of this Book tells us that we need to do two things before we get into the race:

1) Laying aside every weight

Can you imagine a runner who shows up at the race with a storm parker and all the pockets are filled with rocks and wearing big clunky cowboy boots? What does it mean "every weight"? Everything that hinders our Christian progress. It might even be a good thing to some people. Listen, a winner does not choose between the good and the bad, rather he chooses between the better and the best.

2) Laying aside the sin which so easily ensnares us

Remember what I said at the beginning of this study about some of the Judo techniques I practiced? One of the simplest Judo techniques is tripping. It requires very little effort. All you have to do is pull your opponent to the side where he does not put his weight on and trip that side lower leg and turn your body in the same direction. You are using his carelessness and movement. It goes for the same spiritually. Our enemy satan can trip us with a simple move.

So what kind of sin would ensnare us so easily? Did you notice that it didn't say, "sins"? Rather, it marked as "the sin". The author is referring to the sin of unbelief. It was the sin of unbelief that kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land and it is the sin of unbelief that hinders us from entering into our spiritual inheritance in Christ Jesus. Remember, without faith it is impossible to please the Lord.

B. THE ATTITUDE FOR THE RACE

Hebrews 12:1b-2 and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

OK, these two things had to be done before the race and continuously during the race. But what else do we need to do to stay in the race? The author gives us two hints:

1) Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us

Endurance, patience. The Greek word is "hypomone." I love the definition from Thayer's Greek Lexicon:

"Steadfastness, constancy, endurance. In the NT the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings."

2) Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith

The English word "looking" does not give us the full meaning here. The Greek word for this is "aphorao". NASB and NIV give us a better translation than NKJV and other versions according to the Greek dictionary. It is not looking at Jesus nonchalantly, rather fixing our eyes on Him throughout the entire race, not just the first moment.

You may remember this:

Matthew 14:28-30 And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. 30 But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"

Why did Peter start to sink into the water? Because he took his eyes off Jesus and started to notice the surroundings. When we take our eyes off Jesus, we get scared and rightly so. When the difficulties of our lives – I am sure that you can fill the blank with the difficulties in your lives – make such a boisterous storm around us, it is not that difficult to take our eyes off our Master Jesus and look at the situation. The problem with that is our stormy situation goes from bad to worse. Why? Because our faith in God gets out of the equation. Like in Peter's case, as his doubt steps into his mind, his faith steps out. Doubt and faith in God are mutually exclusive and cannot co-exist in our hearts.

Some of you may have this question: "OK, I get it. Jesus is the Author of our faith, but what does it mean that He is the Finisher of it?" For that question, I will remind you of this verse from the Book of Philippians:

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ

V2 tells us that Jesus endured all the shame for the joy. What kind of joy?

1) The joy that Jesus fulfilled the Father's will and glorified Him.

John 17:4 I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.

2) The joy that Jesus opened the Way of salvation for anyone who accepts His invitation.

Jude:24-25 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, 25 To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen.

C. THE EXEMPLAR AND ENABLER

Hebrews 12:3-4 For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. 4 You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

Let's admit it. We, the American spoiled Christians, tend to complain and whine a lot for every little spiritual discomfort, don't we? We often show our spiritual owies to the Lord, while our brothers and sisters from the countries that are extremely hostile to Christianity stand His presence in heaven because they lost their lives because of the physical persecutions.

When this Book was written which was between 60-70 A.D., the early Jewish Christians were persecuted by the Pharisees and other orthodox Jews, but not to the point of the persecution of death.

Our Jesus never tells us to do something we cannot do. When the Lord calls us to do something, He enables us with His power through the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 3:13-14 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Don't you ever wonder if apostle Paul wanted to say, "Okay, I am so done. It ain't worth it." To name a few turmoils he went through:

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 Are they ministers of Christ?--I speak as a fool--I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- 28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

They couldn't put him down. With all these trials that Paul experienced, he fixed his eyes on the Lord Jesus. When we've suffered like Paul, our faith moves out of the realm of the theological and into the arena of the practical. It becomes real.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Fix your eyes on Jesus.

For most of us, we have the attention span of a gnat. If we don't fix our eyes on Jesus, something or someone else will be at the different finish line and we will be off-course.

2) Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Exemplar and the Enabler.

He went before us to show the way and as we yield ourselves to His Spirit more, He increases our faith in Him and enables us to do what glorifies Him.