

THE RACE-COURSE OF THE AGE – ITS "CLOUD OF WITNESSES"

Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." – Hebrews 12:1.

THE opening words of this text direct our minds back to the preceding context, as though St. Paul were saying, In view of the great things, accomplished by these faithful characters of the past, who manifested such faith and confidence in God that they were willing to deny themselves all earthly rights and privileges – seeing that we are thus encompassed with so great a cloud of witnesses – martyrs – let the inspiration of their example spur us to the greatest faithfulness in running our race.

The Apostle speaks of the Ancient Worthies as a "cloud of witnesses." He does not use the word *witnesses* in the sense in which it is used often today – in the sense of *on-lookers*. Originally, the word *witness* was used in the sense of a *witness to the truth*, or a *martyr*. Therefore, the text would seem to mean: Seeing that you have many surrounding you of those whose lives testified to the truth – *martyrs*, who were cut off from home privileges and from life itself – it should have a strong influence upon you. These Ancient Worthies, through the achievements of their lives, are looking down upon you.

The fact that the Ancient Worthies were even then dead need not detract from the Apostle's figure of speech. This style of expression is commonly used by us all. As an illustration, we recall that on one occasion Napoleon addressed his army saying, "My men, thirty centuries look down upon you!" While, strictly speaking, centuries cannot *look down*, yet in one sense of the word they can;

for we can look back into the past and realize matters that are thirty centuries old and more.

The Apostle wishes us to remember that this "*cloud of witnesses*" is surrounding us, and that therefore we should run this race faithfully. While those noble characters will not obtain the prize for which we are running, they are, nevertheless, to have a prize. As we recall how faithfully they endured and achieved what was set before [R5319 : page 291] them, how careful we should be in running the race set before us – a race for glory, honor and immortality!

This "cloud of witnesses" continually surrounds us. The experiences of the Ancient Worthies are our experiences. At every step of our journey we find encouragement, strength, from the contemplation of their course. The Apostle, in giving us the picture of our text, indicates that we are to consider ourselves as running a race. We are to view the affairs of the present life as from a race-course.

No doubt St. Paul had before his mind the popular Grecian games of his day, especially the races. So his suggestions to those in the race for glory, honor and immortality are based upon that mental picture. As the runners in those races would strip themselves of all that was not absolutely necessary, so the Christian should lay aside all possible weights and hindrances in his course, and run with patience the race set before *him*.

WHAT CONSTITUTES WEIGHTS?

The weights to be cast aside might differ in different persons. One person might have inherited titles, honor, position. St. Paul himself was one of these. He was born a Roman citizen – an honor of great distinction in his day. This prerogative he laid aside when he entered the Christian race-course. He did, however, refer to his Roman citizenship when the interests of the Truth made it

advantageous for him to do so. But he never tried to follow a middle course – to benefit himself and please worldly acquaintances a part of the time and then fellowship with the Lord's people at other times. One thing alone he did, as he tells us in these words: "Brethren, I count not myself to have *apprehended*; but this *one thing* I do, *forgetting* those things which are *behind*, and *reaching forth unto those things* which are *before*, I press toward the MARK for the Prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus." – Phil. 3:13,14.

Another weight might be *wealth*. One possessing much money might be hindered in the race by fostering the thought that he must occupy a large house, keep many servants, and live as do others of his class, but that nevertheless he would attend the meetings of the Lord's people. Still another weight might be talent along some line. Another might be love of the approval of men, etc.

He who desires to win in the race for glory and honor eternal should lay aside all those weights and any others which he may recognize as such; otherwise he will be so handicapped that he will not run well. Some runners will be more than overcomers and will receive the prize. Others will barely be saved, because of handicaps, and will receive inferior positions.

St. Paul tells us how much he valued these earthly possessions – ambitions, honors, etc. He weighted them and compared them with the Prize of the High Calling **[R5319 : page 292]** of God in Christ. His judgment in regard to these earthly honors was that they are but *loss and dross*. Therefore he threw them all away.

Of those who retain their hold on earthly things the Lord declares, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of God?" These riches are not merely of gold, but may be of honor, position, power, approbation of men, etc. All these are likely to prove a hindrance in the race upon which we have been invited to enter for the Prize.

As we look back to the faithful witnesses of the past, we find that they carried very few weights along with them. They cast their weights aside, and ran with patience the course before them.

Not all weights and hindrances are to be cast aside, however. A man who enters the race with a wife and children must not throw these aside. If he has a child on each shoulder, then he must *run with them*. But if one who is *unmarried* is thinking of engaging in this race, he will do well to consider carefully *how many children he should have on each shoulder, or whether he should have a wife on his shoulders*. Some would be hindered with a wife, while others might be hindered without a wife. Each must decide for himself what is best. We are not trying to lay down rules.

INHERITED WEAKNESSES AND BESETTING SINS

Let us now consider that part of our text which deals with besetting sins. Another translation says *the close-girding sin* – the sin which wraps itself closely around us. Some sins are like a loose-flying garment, and others wrap themselves tightly about us. With these hindrances the runner is obliged to stop now and then to disengage himself, and so loses time.

We are to avoid sin in every sense of the word. *No one* has the right to sin. If we cannot rid ourselves entirely of our close-girding sin, we must put it off to such an extent that it will not interfere with our running. If this sin be an inherited weakness, a part of one's very nature, what then? Then he shall *run* in the race – not walk, not sit, but RUN, bending all his energy to win, straining every muscle, every power of his being. This is what the Apostle sets before us in our text.

The Lord has set this subject clearly before us in the Bible. The race is not an *imaginary* race, but a *real* one. It is a race that the Lord has arranged, and He has *definitely stated the terms*, the assistance to be expected, and the Prize at the end of the course. We thank God for the explicit information given in the Scriptures and for all the helps and encouragements of the way, as well as for this great cloud of

witnesses surrounding us. And by the Lord's grace we will run with patience; for without this grace of the Holy Spirit one would soon fall out by the way, would soon lose all.

CONSTANT VIGILANCE NECESSARY

Any one might run a few steps; but when some of these find all the affairs of human life hindering them, and realize that they must drop all unnecessary weights, they begin to think that there is no use to try – *the sacrifice is too great*. So the Apostle encourages us to have *patience*; for all these trials, difficulties, etc., *rightly borne*, are developing *character*. The Lord wants true, loyal characters, *established* in *righteousness*, and these cannot be developed and demonstrated except by just such experiences as He gives His people.

The Apostle well knew the terms and conditions of the race in which he had engaged, and that it would be impossible for him to win unless he lived up to those conditions. He knew that the closest attention and most untiring vigilance would be necessary to reach the goal on time, and during the race there would be more or less uncertainty as to who would get the victory – the crown of life. In the Olympic and other Greek games it was always uncertain as to who would receive the much-coveted laurel crown.

The Christian is running a much greater race than any earthly course could ever exhibit. We know the goal toward which we run, and we have a sense of security – that if we run faithfully we shall gain the Prize of our High Calling. Ours is not a race merely to the strong, and a victory to the swift. It is a race in which each one, according to the earnestness of his effort, will be rewarded. If one runs *with all his soul and strength* he will surely gain the Prize. And never before was there such a race! never one so remarkable! never one so glorious as this race set before *us!*

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