

Hebrews 12:1

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.

On Wed. 31 October 2007, the *New York Times* had news for the New York City Marathon

- USA Track & Field, the national governing body for running
- Has banned the use of headphones and portable audio players like iPods
- New York City Marathon's race director said, runners should want
- 'every single sense tuned into the experience of running the race of a lifetime'
- I like that phrase 'race of a lifetime' – that's an important picture for a Christian
- For we are engaged in running a marathon – not 26¼ miles or two and a half hours
- But a run that begins when we first trust in Christ and continues through to heaven

The writer to the Hebrews undoubtedly has this idea in mind when he writes

- 'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us' (Hebrews 12:1)
- 'perseverance' suggests that it is a marathon rather than a sprint
- but the key phrase in these opening verses to chapter 12 is 'let us run'
- and it is to that invitation that we must turn our attention
- Every day I seem to see a number of people out running – with or without iPods
- I guess that most of these runners are doing it just to keep up their level of fitness
- So we must commend them and those who are running on treadmills for doing so
- In the ancient world, the idea of running on a treadmill would have been bizarre
- The lifestyle was so different that people would not need labour intensive devices
- Such as treadmills, cross-trainers and rowing machines
- To compensate for labour saving devices - cars, mechanical diggers, power tools
- At work and at home we take so many things (like washing machines) for granted
- Our writer to the Hebrews is not thinking of running for exercise
- Nor is he thinking of that relatively recent concept, 'the fun run'
- He is thinking of serious running – either competitive training or the race itself

I think there is a vital lesson that we, as today's Christians, must learn even from that

- 'let us run' – this is an invitation or an exhortation to join in
- but, we need to be clear, the writer is inviting us to share in something that is tough
- the great aim of many people in churches today is to jog along
- to jog along in life, to jog along in faith and to jog along in the Christian community
- it produces a life, a faith and a community that is as insipid as it is dull
- because it is made of people who are as insipid as they (or might I say 'we') are dull
- there is never an occasion when I (the preacher) am above the message
- the challenge of the message just gets to me a few hours before it gets to you

When I lived in Mitcham, I played football for a reasonable team

- I was playing perhaps the best that I ever played, possibly because I was the right age
- In my first season we were promoted, from division three to division two
- In my second season we were promoted, from division two to division one
- I did not have a third season, the manger said to me he was letting me go
- Because, unless I could put in the training, which with my work I was unable to do
- 'Johnny,' he said, 'you are never going to be fit enough'

It was okay, I signed for another team where overall fitness was not such a big issue

- I played for them for five years, continuing at much the same level until I was 41
- There was a sense in which it was still football – but it was not the best I could do
- One time I spoke to the manager about a tactical issue – he replied
- ‘We don’t worry too much about that kind of thing, we just play’

I have a feeling that this is how so much that passes for Christianity looks to the world today

- We are the ecclesiastical equivalent of the sporting fun run
- The church equivalent of the football I played over a period of 10 declining years
- This is running that would be unrecognisable to Paula Radcliffe
- This is football that would be unrecognisable to Steven Gerrard
- This is Christianity that would be unrecognisable to the heroes of the faith
- When asked about a point of Christian doctrine (a tactical issue if you like)
- Today’s Methodists are quite likely to say, ‘we don’t worry, we just sing’
- But before we single ourselves out for special criticism – we are not alone
- When challenged by a person who says something like
- ‘I think it is being nice and doing good that counts’ we feel vulnerable
- because we feel that we are not (or if you want me to be personal I feel I am not)
- modelling the kind of Biblical faith and living that exemplifies true Christianity

This is an invitation and an exhortation from the writer to the Hebrews to get off the fun run

- and into the race – a race when we must be

I FREE
II FOCUSED
III FIXED

I FREE

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 ...

(Hebrews 12:1)

The first word of Hebrews 12 is critical for our understanding – therefore

- ‘whenever you see a therefore ask what it is there for’
- that’s not a difficult question to answer – in the original letter there were no chapters
- and we are being reminded that this is the climax of the account of heroes of the faith
- one of the most inspiring chapters in the Bible, that the writer has recounted
- in what we call chapter 11 – what I want us to see from the briefest overview
- is that the men and women in this chapter were not perfect
- but they were in the race – their faith was not insipid and dull
- and if we spend a moment recalling them, and their faith, we must learn
- in essence they were not different people from us – but they became greater than us
- when we read of their mistakes, we must learn from them
- when we read of their faithfulness, we must be inspired by them
- for they are ‘a great cloud of witnesses’ surrounding us

We must clarify what ‘great cloud of witnesses’ means

- it could, of course, mean that these saints are watching us and urging us on
- as if they have crossed the line and they are calling us also to follow
- that’s not the worst idea that I have ever heard – but I don’t think it is the right one
- they are a great *cloud* of people – as we would say a great *crowd*
- perhaps described as a *cloud* because of the dust generated in a drier climate
- they are not witnesses in the sense of spectators but as examples

These are men and women of faith, the men and women the reader has met in chapter 11

- faith is a living thing, a way of life, that the writer wants the readers to continue
- it is this living faith for which people in previous generations were commended
- the very essence of faith is that God originated and created the world
- in what is an overview of the Old Testament, people of faith are commended
- though it is not clear why some are chosen and others are omitted
- before the great flood, Abel and Enoch are commended for their faith
- which resulted in their being righteous and pleasing God
- Believing that there is a God and that he cares for us is the basis of faith
- Noah built the ark in holy fear – and received a righteousness that comes by faith
- Abraham, great father of the Hebrew people believed God, trusting his promises
- These promises were the heritage of Isaac, Jacob and Esau and later Joseph
- This was the heritage of faith of Moses, who did not turn his back on his people
- But by the grace of God, led them out from Egypt to the Promised Land

Probably realising that he cannot say everything there is to say about the heroes of faith

- Our writer starts to summarise,
- He does not mention Joshua but does mention the conquest of Jericho
- He includes Rahab, the former prostitute, a woman and a Gentile
- Even a woman from such a background can become an example of faith
- Through faith believers experienced victory, success and spiritual reward
- By faith believers experienced personal deliverance from wild beasts and tyranny
- But believers were not always delivered from adversity even though they had faith
- They were tortured, jeered at, flogged, chained and put in prison
- They were stoned, they were cut in half, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated
- Yet they were all commended for their faith
- Unlike the heroes of the faith at the beginning of the chapter, mentioned at length
- Or the heroes of the faith in the middle of the chapter, mentioned briefly
- The heroes of faith at the end of the chapter are not mentioned by name
- In outward appearance they were insignificant and unimportant
- But the reality of the situation is very different
- they were destined to receive the blessings of the promises of God

These are the people of the promise – these are our people

- we share with them, faith, hope and love
- for, like them, we who belong to Christ have a place in God’s plan
- that is he has promised to make us perfect and to bless us with more than we can ask
- they were destined to receive the blessings of the promises of God
- they are the great cloud of witnesses in heaven, we are running to the finish

But to run to the finish

- we must throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles
- In order to gain publicity for his appeal for money for leukaemia charities
- Lloyd Scott entered the London marathon wearing a deep-sea diving suit
- One thing was for certain he was not going to win – but at least he finished
- Becoming, in five days, eight hours, 29 minutes and 46 seconds
- The slowest ever person to complete the marathon – all good fun
- With a typically large dose of British eccentricity – much marvelled at by the world
- If Mr Scott had not finished the course, he might well have not made as much money
- And that would have been a shame – especially for such a deserving charity
- But what price not finishing the course, when the finish line is eternity in heaven?
- It is clear that some things in life must be rejected if we are to run effectively
- These things may not be wrong in themselves
- And I am sure that it is not wrong to have hobbies and interests
- The finest professional athletes have hobbies and interests – in their place
- And there is a difference between carrying superfluous weight and a disastrous trip

A key word for athletes and participants in sports these days is the need to stay:

II FOCUSED

The Christian life, like a long-distance run, is difficult and, therefore, takes sustained effort

- In this the believer needs to learn perseverance
- Many of us have known believers who have fallen by the wayside
- Perhaps we marvel that we are still in the race ourselves
- When we are at a low point in their Christian faith – it is tempting to blame others
- When what we really need to do is to get back to being focused
- When you ask a believer who is low in faith, prone to falling into temptation
- How they are getting on with the basics of the Christian faith – doing simple things:
- Attending the services regularly, sharing in them fervently and attentively
- Reading their Bible diligently and praying regularly
- And sharing in genuine Christian fellowship with others
- You can almost guess what answer you are going to get before you ask
- So when we make a choice that keeps us out of the services
- When we are not sharing in them fervently and attentively
- When we are casual about reading our Bibles and our personal prayers
- And have little or no genuine Christian fellowship with others
- We cannot be surprised if we are low in faith or vulnerable to temptation
- And it is time to refocus on the race marked out for us
- This is a marathon, not a sprint, we need to be determined to stay on the course

In the summer of 2002, Michael had his first sports day at Woodford School

- Michael is a good runner but this was his first serious race
- I told Michael when the gun is fired look only at me and run as fast as you can
- Taking my position behind the finishing tape I fixed him with my eye – he won
- Convinced this was the formula for success, Michael returned the compliment
- For the father's race and was disgusted that his 44 year old father only came fourth!

III FIXED

But the writer to the Hebrews knew about this technique as well

- ‘Let us fix our eyes on Jesus,’ what James Moffatt rendered
- with no eyes for anyone or anything except Jesus
- For Jesus is the one who has run the race before us
- And is the very best example of how the race should be run

As far as our writer is concerned, Jesus led all the people of faith even from the earliest days

- He persevered, and endured even death on a cross, because he was focused
- Focused on the joy set before him – the joy of bringing his people to salvation

I started out preparing this sermon in the hope of saying something about All Saints Day

- Although All Saints Day is 1 November – we do not have a special service
- But it is nevertheless important to remember that all who have died in faith
- Are now in the great crowd of witnesses – believers who have gained the prize
- Strangely, many of us derive the most inspiration, from those who faced adversity
- So in concluding today I want to say just a little about the Christian in adversity

That great Christian and writer of the last century, C. S. Lewis, notes

- That pain and difficulty are part and parcel of living in a fallen world
- But that such pains and difficulties have meaning
- This is a hard truth but one in which I think the believer can find great comfort
- Most of us can relate to the fact that we are closer to God in the bad times
- People often cry out to God when things are at their most difficult
- Of this, C. S. Lewis observes:

“God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Part of me kicks against that – it’s easy to accept God whispering in our pleasure

- I think most Christians accept that God speaks in our conscience
- But it is more difficult to get to grips with the idea of God being heard in our pains
- We experience not only suffering in the world, through war and natural disaster
- But also personal suffering, when a loved one falls sick, or dies – pain is a reality
- And the believer is faced with the question, ‘why doesn’t God do something?’
- It’s a tough question tied up with human freewill and is ultimately a mystery

My only way of coping with this is to answer that God has done something in Jesus

- And in Jesus, he has shared in our pain and our death
- At a human level, the death of Jesus on the cross is the ultimate evil
- Jesus’ betrayal, torture, crucifixion and death are the most meaningless acts ever
- And yet, his death on the cross is the ultimate good – clothed with meaning
- If God can transform that – it must be possible for him to transform everything
- Suffering, while painful, often leads to a tremendous outpouring of good
- It can bring us to a point of reprioritising in life for the better

Brian San, a young Australian Roman Catholic student who studied at Oxford

- Was incredibly moved by his meeting with Chinese Christian, Brother Yun
- Sometimes called 'the Heavenly Man'
- Born in 1958, the same year as me, Brother Yun was tortured to the point of death
- And yet he found that Jesus' love obliterated all his suffering, San comments:
- From the suffering we see in the world, we just can't see what purpose it has
- But maybe God can
- The pain Jesus endured on the cross must have been indescribable
- And yet the greatest good resulted from that suffering. Maybe (*just maybe*)
- our suffering serves to bring about some good that at this moment only God can know
- Brian San continues, Jesus is there in our darkest hour, when we have the most pain
- He takes our pain, and doesn't eliminate it, but strips it of its power over us
- The average Christian is not white, Western and affluent
- But is from a developing country, poor and probably hasn't got much to eat
- Yet, the people who have the most right to be angry with God
- Turn to him in their hour of need, finding peace and joy
- Believing whatever they endure is nothing compared to what the Lord endured
- And nothing compared to the joy of really knowing Jesus
- That's what moved Brian San most when he met Brother Yun
- 'the sheer joy in his face of knowing that he is loved by Jesus'

I cannot say that I welcome personal suffering, pain, or bereavement

- I am not expecting you to do so – but in it, by it, we can either find hope and meaning
- Or we consign everything, good and bad, to hopelessness and meaninglessness
- In suffering we have to draw strength from the positive outcome of Jesus' suffering
- As we cope with personal pains and suffering – we must focus on Jesus
- And in doing so ensure we do not allow bitterness to take root in our lives
- The world around us is one of criticism, disloyalty and selfishness
- Even in church we often fail to take account of how our actions affect others
- Instead we must consider Jesus, so that we will not grow weary or lose heart

In contemplating dying, the Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, wrote:

And so beside the silent sea
I wait the muffled oar,
No harm from him can come to me
On ocean or on shore.

It affirms the belief that God does not send us harm, but through it can draw us closer to him

- We can allow everything that happens either to draw us closer to God
- Or to drive us away from him – in running the Christian race (a marathon)

Let us run:

- I FREE, throwing off all that hinders and the sin that entangles
- II FOCUSED, by means of perseverance on the way ahead
- III our eyes FIXED on Jesus, seeking to live for God faithfully
Trusting in Jesus Christ our Lord
And believing that he can use what ever happens - for his glory.