

**HEBREWS 43
(Hebrews 12:12-15)**

**RUNNING THE RACE
By Ron Harvey
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INTRODUCTION

Everybody wants to go to heaven. Is there anyone here who does not want to go to heaven? And if I go out into the streets and ask the masses of people if they would like to go to heaven, if they are honest, they certainly would say, "Yes, I would like to go to heaven."

Example: You remember the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers. Balak, the King of Moab, sent Balaam out to curse Israel. And when he opened his mouth to curse Israel, he blessed them instead. And Balaam began to see the glory of Israel and the glory of the God of Israel. And he said, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Numbers 23:10)

Oh how the unrighteous would like to die like the righteous. How in the end they would like to have the destiny of the righteous.

But few there are who will run the race of the righteous. Oh how they would like to go to heaven, but they have no desire to run the race.

Even fewer there are that run the race the right way. Some run after Muhammad. Some run after Joseph Smith. Some even run after Moses. People run after all kinds of gods and various religions. But Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life and no man cometh unto the Father but by me."

There is only one race that leads to the gates of heaven and that is the race of Jesus Christ. Only those who run his race will obtain the prize in the end. You can run yourself silly on another race course, and in the end you will look around for someone to hand you a trophy, and Jesus will say, "Depart from me, I never knew you." And instead of getting a prize you will get a surprise! You will be so surprised to see that your reward is the eternal wrath of God.

We are in a race

This passage in Hebrews 12 confirms that as Christians we are in a race. And that is why it says in verse one,

Let us run with patience the race that is set before us.

This is not the only passage in the Scriptures that refers to the Christian life in terms of a race. See I Corinthians 9:24.

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.

So you see that when we have come to Christ, we have lined up at the starting line to run a race.

Now when runners line up to run a race they know that in the end only one will receive the prize. There may be 3000 runners in the Boston Marathon, but in the end one person will cross the line ahead of the others and he will receive the trophy.

Now you say, Bro. Ron, is there only going to be one person who will get to heaven in the end? And of course, the Scriptures teach that there will be a countless multitude who will receive the prize of eternal life in the end. This analogy in I Corinthians is not designed to teach that only one will get the prize. Rather, it is teaching that we must run the race as though only one will win.

So run, that ye may obtain. (v.24)

How are we to run? We are to run, just as in foot races, as though only one will win the prize. How much effort does a runner put into the race? He gives it everything he has. And this is the story of the Christian life.

You are to run this Christian race as though it is necessary to outrun all others. It reminds me of a story.

Example: Two men were out walking in the hills of East Tennessee and all of a sudden, out from the bushes appeared a

ferocious Grizzly Bear. And it was obvious that this bear had an evil intent. He was raised up on his hind feet and he was showing his teeth and it was obvious that he was looking for a meal and he was about to have one. And one of the men threw off his hiking boots and quickly put on his tennis shoes. And his friend said, “What are you doing, don’t you know we can’t outrun a Grizzly Bear? And the man said, “I don’t have to outrun the bear, all I have to do is outrun you!”

And we are to run the Christian race as though we are running to beat all others and to win the prize in the end.

Listen to the Apostle Paul.

But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was in me.

I Cor. 15:10

And when he came to the end of his life, the Apostle Paul could say,

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.

II Tim.4:7

We are in a great race. It is a marathon. And we must run this race with all our strength.

Example: Just before the national championship basketball game, you might hear players in the locker room say something like this: “Let’s leave it all on the court.” That means, don’t leave anything in the locker room. Don’t hold back. “Let’s not lose this game and then have to say afterward, I didn’t give all I had.”

And this is an apt description of our Christian race. We cannot give 10 percent. We cannot give 50 percent. But we must commit 100 percent to the race before us.

Some people may say, “Christ is an important part of my life.” Others may say, “He is a very prominent part of my life.” But the one who wants to win the race says, “Christ is everything in my life.”

We are in a marathon race

You should know that the race that is set before you is a marathon. It is the race of life. And you have a course to run. And furthermore, you must finish the course. The book of Revelation makes this point very clearly. One of the great messages of Revelation is,

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life.
Revelation 2:7

He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.
Revelation 2:11

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.

Revelation 2:17

He that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations.

Revelation 2:26

See Revelation 3:5
See Revelation 3:12
See Revelation 3:21

How different this message is than the one that is preached when we manipulate someone down the aisle, have him utter a rote prayer and then hand him a certificate of salvation. And he walks out thinking the prize is won with no race whatsoever.

It was necessary even for the great apostle Paul to strive to the end; to fight the good fight; to run the course; to keep the faith. And if it was necessary for him, it is necessary for you and for me.

This is the very message of the book of Hebrews. There are some Hebrews in the churches who have professed Christ with their mouths, but who because of hardships and persecutions are backing out of the race. And the writer is imploring them to keep pushing forward in the faith of Christ. They are tempted to retreat to the race of Judaism, but the writer

says,

Lift up the hands which hang down. Lift up the feeble knees. (v.12)

Many of you have at times grown weary. You have grown weary with the course that is set before you. You have grown weary with the obstacles that you have encountered in the race. You have grown weary with the trials and the troubles that try your faith.

But I would suggest to you that there is no trouble that has come upon you that is not from the Lord. We believe that God is sovereign over this universe and his hands are never off the steering wheel.

There was a church down in Mississippi several years ago. And a tornado came through and obliterated the building. It was carried away and there was nothing left standing. And when they interviewed the pastor on television he said, "One thing we know, we know that God had nothing to do with this."

And that is exactly the theology that permeates the religions of man.

Of course God had something to do with it. Who is in control of the winds and the waters and the earthquakes and the volcanoes if it is not God? Is the Devil in control of the forces of nature? Are the forces of nature just left to chance?

No. These are all obstacles that God puts before us in the race of life. He brings a Tsunami here and an earthquake there. He brings an illness here and another heavy burden there. He brings disappointment here and disillusionment there. And all of this is the race that we must run.

Example: Most runners these days have trainers. And the trainer makes the runner run hard training courses to prepare for the race. And the runner often gets mad at the trainer because the trainer seems to be a harsh master.

And God is the greatest trainer of Christians of all time. God has the rod of discipline in his hand. And he has all the resources of the universe at his disposal. And he will train the Christian in the way of faith and the way of holiness from beginning to end. We are unholy brutes when we begin the

race, but when God has fully trained us, we will be trained in the way of righteousness.

The specific commands of verses 12 – 14

- I. Lift up the hands which hang down and the feeble knees.
 - II. Make straight paths for your feet.
 - III. Follow peace and holiness
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- I. Lift up the hands which hang down and the feeble knees and make straight paths for your feet.

Now it is clear what this means in the figurative language. If a runner's hands are hanging down, if his knees are becoming weak and if he is wobbling all over the race track, then obviously, he must reach down into some reserve of strength. In sports language, we call it digging deep. "Come on man, dig deep." Lift those hands up and kick those knees high and run straight."

But that is all language to help us understand spiritual truth. What does it mean for our hands to be hanging down and for our knees to be feeble and our paths to be crooked. What does it mean for us to lift up our hands which hang down and to lift up our feeble knees and to run a straight course?

All of these figures are written to benefit our Christian walk.

Obviously, the hands hanging down and the feeble knees and wobbling on a crooked path denote the tendency that we all have to grow weary and to abandon our Christian duties. And when we grow weary, we might become less resolute and our courage fails us.

The hands hanging down would seem to be a sign of spiritual exhaustion. And it conveys the picture of despondency, doesn't it? It pictures the one who has slowed up in the race and who has resigned himself to the reality that he cannot win the race and even that he cannot finish the race. And we should always be on the alert for sagging hands

and feeble knees. We should watch for it in our own lives and also in the lives of others, for when the hands begin to hang down and the knees begin to become weak, then the person is about ready to quit the race.

There are many things which might cause your hands to hang down and your knees to grow weak. Only you know what weakens you the most. Perhaps it is the constant battle with sin that drags you down – that old enemy within. We are in a constant warfare with that evil nature that we were born with. And you might grow weary in the struggle.

Others may grow weary because of the lack of apparent success in their Christian walk. Perhaps they grow disheartened because they serve the church and they serve God year after year with no apparent success.

Some of us are prone to be discouraged if others speak evil of us or even if others fail to pat us on the back. It is easy to get discouraged and disheartened. And instead of pumping those arms, the hands begin to hang down in discouragement.

But let's simply look at what it says. It says, "Lift up the hands and the feeble knees."

Just like the trainer would say, "Quit feeling sorry for yourself. Get those hands and knees up. Go on with the race."

Now the question would be, "How do we go on? How are we to lift up the hands and the knees? Do we have the strength to do it?"

And the answer is that God has given us all that we need to run the race.

You and I have strength that the world does not know about. We are after all a new creation. We have been quickened and made new. We have the help of the Holy Spirit of God. We have a strength and a power within us that is greater than any obstacle that God brings in our way.

Christians, in their greatest weakness, yet have strength to endure. God has breathed life into your soul and he has made you able to run the course to its conclusion.

Read I Corinthians 10:13.

No matter what your circumstances, God has not abandoned you. The only question is whether you will abandon God. And if you are his, you will not.

So, lift up your hands and your feeble knees. There is a reason why you are suffering. God has a purpose in it. It is by design and not by chance that trials and discouragements have come upon you.

And then also know that these trials that you face will produce in you the fruit of righteousness. The sufferings that you endure are not in vain. When it is all said and done you will be a better man or a better woman because of the training you are receiving.

So, don't get discouraged. Rather, lift up your hands that hang down and your feeble knees and run straight and true. Lift up your hearts. Be full of energy for the race that is set before you. We don't have time to dilly dally around, do we? We don't have time for despondency and discouragement. The days are passing by one by one and there is more of the race to run.

II. Make straight paths for your feet. (v.13)

Obviously, a runner must keep his eye on the course and he must run a straight path.

Example: In mathematics, they always taught us that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

Now if you veer off left or right then obviously you will be traveling a greater distance.

Example: Some of the time on trips, I take a wrong turn. And when we have gone 40 miles out of the way, then we have to stop and get new directions.

And the Christian race is much like that. Whatever course God has set before us, we must keep our eyes ahead of us and run a straight course.

Actually, when it says to make straight paths for your feet (v.13), the idea is to make even paths. It is a good idea to remove unnecessary obstacles out of your way. Some things along the racecourse might be avoided so that you might not be hindered.

If a runner is running along the dry path and there is a slimy, murky swamp to his side, he would be foolish to try to run through the swamp.

Example: My grandmother used to live in Morongo Valley, California which was a desert. And we used to hike around. (There wasn't much to do there.) But if we got off the path and tried to rough it, we would come limping home with cactus thorns and sore feet.

The Christian life is that way. Make your path even and straight. If there are distractions along the way that would slow you down, maybe it is a good idea to avoid them.

Example: Jeannine and Marian recently told me that they were thinking about giving up the casinos in Tunica. (Just Kidding)

Now it is most important to run a straight, even course when the hands are hanging down and the knees are feeble. If the knees are lame, it is reckless and foolish to run off course because that is not the best place for weak knees.

Rather, set your eyes upon your spiritual goals. Run a straight, even path, with no unnecessary distractions, and your knees will heal up. You will find renewed strength and your hands will not hang down and your knees will lift up.

III. Follow peace with all men.

Keeping with the analogy of a race, when we are running, we are running away from the starting line and we are running to the finish line. We are running away from something and running to something.

Example: John the Baptist told the Pharisees to "Flee the wrath to come." He said, Pharisees, you better get running. The wrath of God is on your trail and it is about to overtake you.

And in a very real sense, we are running away from a former way of life and to a new way of life. We are to run fast and leave the former things behind. If you used to be a drunk, you flee and you run to sobriety. If you used to live a life of fornication and adultery, you run away from that and run to a life of purity and cleanness. If you used to be an angry brawler, you run to a life of peace.

And that is what it says in verse 14.

Follow after peace with all men.

This word “follow” means to chase after. It is not that we tip toe after it or lag behind it just keeping it in sight. But we chase it like a hound chases a rabbit. We pursue it with all we have.

It says, “Follow” or “Chase after” peace with all men.

In the Christian race, one of our principle duties is to live at peace. And notice, it says, “Follow after peace with all men.”

Now all men are not going to try to live at peace with us. But we are to pursue peace with all men. I suspect that means that somewhere along the way we are going to have to humble ourselves and bite our tongues and give way to others. Even when they are wrong and we are right, I suspect we are going to have to give way at times.

And that is a good thing. Humbleness is a good thing. Considering others better than ourselves is a good thing. And the peace that it brings is a good thing.

IV. Follow after holiness.

This is the principle thing that we are chasing in this life - holiness. God has saved us for this purpose – that we might be holy and without blame.

It is a very hard chase because we have started out so far behind. The rabbit has taken off and has a long head start on the hound. But our duty is to chase that rabbit of holiness until we finally catch up with him on the other side of eternity.

Notice it says to chase after holiness. This implies that it is something that will never be caught in this life.

What would you think of someone who came to you and said, "I have finally caught that elusive rabbit called holiness. I have now reached the perfection that once I was chasing.

Why, we would know better wouldn't we.

Our duty is to follow after it and to chase it down with all our strength until finally, God will give it to us in all its fullness when he changes this body.

Keep your eyes ahead

Phil. 3:13