

Pentecost 13C
August 22, 2010
Hymns: 413 - 457 - 740 - 552 v1,3

HEBREWS 3:1-2 (1-13 epistle) (slide 1 at greeting)
RUN THE RACE MARKED OUT FOR YOU!

***Believe You Are A Winner!**
***Persevere In The Race!**

Dear Runners, one and all, in the race of life –

On October 13, 1963, Sandy Koufax was pitching for the Dodgers in the World Series, before a record crowd of 69,000 in Yankee Stadium. It was a crucial game, and Koufax was one strike-out short of breaking the record of 14 strike-outs in a World Series game. Koufax later said it was not only a challenge but an inspiration to know that among the spectators that day was former Dodger pitcher Carl Erskine. Erskine held the record Koufax was shooting for. Koufax broke the record. He says one reason he accomplished this high mark was that Erskine, the former champion, was not only watching, but was pulling for him too!

Slide 2 The writer of Hebrews begins the twelfth chapter of this great book like this: *“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.”*

Few writers begin a chapter with the word “therefore.” Therefore refers to something that came before. What does “therefore” refer to? It refers to those amazing heroes of the Bible in Hebrews 11: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and others who, says the writer, “through faith conquered kingdoms [and] administered justice . . .” The “therefore” refers to these heroes of old. “Therefore,” he writes, beginning chapter 12: *“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.”*

What an inspirational thought! These heroes of the faith are now our cheerleaders. They are now a great cloud of witnesses. However, unlike Carl Erskine witnessing Koufax’s feat that October 1963 afternoon, our heroes of faith are witnesses, not of us - but TO US of what our faith should be! The Bible witnesses of faith in God’s salvation cheer us from the “stands of history.” They call for us to imitate their faith in our lives today. I would like for us to focus for a few moments on this cloud of witnesses in order that we might better understand why they can serve as such great encouragement for us. The faith of our spiritual ancestors can motivate us to live more deeply the faith in which they set us such fine examples.

Slide 3 **These heroes of our faith, first of all, accomplished great things not because of who they were but because of what they believed and we should say, even moreso because of the God in Whom they believed.** We call the men and women listed in chapter 11 of Hebrews “heroes,” and they were, but that does not mean that they were perfect. They were not. Sometimes God had to do God’s work not because of them, but in spite of them.

You and I are disturbed from time to time because someone in the public eye today is shown to have feet of clay. Athletes, politicians, Hollywood stars, famous preachers all have been known to fall. This should not surprise us. It’s always been true. Go back and read the story of Babe Ruth, the legendary baseball player, if you think today’s athletes, for example, are weaker than those of previous generations. People are people. People are flawed. People are sinners! Anyone is horribly misguided if their faith is in people and not in God. Scripture tells us that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

It’s true in the Bible, just as it is in modern life. These early heroes were not perfect, but God did not give up on them and let them go their way of sin. That’s the good news. God didn’t give up on them and God promises not to immediately cast us aside because of our sins. Just because we have tripped and fallen does not mean God writes us off. When we have turned our backs on God, God can turn us around. When we have

destroyed our relationship with God, God can rebuild. The heroes of the Bible who surround us as a cloud of witnesses today accomplished what they did-- not because of who they were, but because of what they believed and because of Him in Whom they believed! They trusted God and God did a great work through them.

I don't know about you, but that's good news to me. I'm not perfect.....and you're not perfect. That's why the writer tells us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." I think most of us long to do that, but it is not easy. The image this chapter conveys, of course, is that of a race. The stands are filled with the great cloud of witnesses. We are at the starting block. But wait, there is a chain tied to our leg and at the end of the chain is a weight. That weight is our sin. Think of running with that chain and that weight slowing you down. Every once in a while our legs will get tangled in the chain. It might even cause us to fall. This is the problem of sin. It keeps us from winning the race. It stands in the way between us and a righteous, holy God.

We are not perfect people, but Jesus was. And through faith, His righteousness is credited to us. Where we daily and often fall down in the race of life, Jesus remained standing and running strong – all the way to the cross, where He took our punishment upon Himself. That's why the writer to the Hebrews calls Jesus – the author and perfecter of our faith. Jesus is the One Who wrote the script – so to speak – of what we are to believe in. And He "perfects" our faith – brings it to a safe and sound conclusion in its full realization for all eternity, beginning on Judgment Day. Now God forgives our sin, but still God longs to help us get that chain off our legs, get rid of that sin, so that we can be what God has called us to be. So, the writer encourages us to "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and . . . [to] run with perseverance the race marked out for us." That's the first thing we need to see. The heroes of the Bible were not perfect, but God did not give up on them any more than God gives up on us. They believed God and God forgave them their sin and helped them overcome the sin that could have so easily destroyed them.

Slide 4 Here's the second thing we need to see about that great cloud of witnesses: **They were people who persevered, despite never seeing the realization of their dreams in this life. In fact, some of them suffered grievously.** This is a hard teaching of Scripture. Just because you are a person of faith doesn't mean the race is any easier. In fact, the race might be more difficult. Listen to what else the writer of Hebrews has to say about these great heroes in chapter 11: "*Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.*" Then the writer adds this brief understatement, "*The world was not worthy of them.*" It's always difficult to watch a good person suffer, and yet we know that there is no greater witness for Christ than the person of faith who experiences pain and still is able to praise God.

That's the way life works. There is no more powerful witness than those who have suffered tragedies in their lives, but who have held onto their faith in God. God did not cause that tragedy, but God can use that tragedy in one believer's life to minister to others who are hurting. Some of you are able to witness to others quite effectively about your faith because of some deep hurt that, due to God's grace, you have been able to turn into a victory.

The great cloud of witnesses that is cheering us on in our race of faith certainly knew what it was to hurt. There is nothing hard that we have experienced that they did not experience as well. Physical suffering, loss of loved ones, rejection by friends, betrayal by associates--they would know what we are experiencing! They've been there, and more. "*Chained . . . put in prison . . . stoned . . . sawed in two . . . put to death by the sword . . . destitute, persecuted and mistreated.*"

When we are in a time of crisis we have the feeling that no one understands. Believe me, the saints who make up that great cloud of witnesses would understand. Even more importantly, our living Lord Jesus, Who is looking down on us in love - He truly does understand! The prophet Isaiah called Him "*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*" (Isaiah 53:3). There is no pain, no hurt, no grief that we will experience that He has not experienced. Ours is not a Pollyanna faith that says that all we have to do is believe and life will be smooth sailing. Rather our faith says this world holds many sorrows, but there is Someone Who holds us in

His loving arms when we are in distress. The heroes of the Bible were not perfect, but God did not give up on them, but strengthened them for life's trials, and finally delivered them into the glory of heaven. In the same way, God does not give up on us. They were people who were often disappointed and sometimes suffered grievously, but they did not give up on God. And neither should we.

Slide 5 Let's underscore something about this great cloud of witnesses: **They stayed in the race.** This is such an important principle. Sometimes in the race of life we stumble. Maybe we betray our own Christian values based on the Scriptures. Maybe we just do something really stupid. Or perhaps the fault is not ours at all. Life hands us a crushing blow out of the blue--the breakup of a marriage, the loss of a loved one, a devastating diagnosis by a doctor, the loss of a job. A friend comes by and says to us, "Hang in there." And suddenly we realize that this is all we can do. And with all eternity at stake, dropping out of the race is not an option. Not really. So, instead, we drop to our knees and pray, "*Lord, have mercy on me. I don't know if I can make it another day, but people are depending on me. I still want to make my life count for You. Help me to somehow make it through, and I'll give You the glory.*"

Sometimes that is the best that a person of faith can do. This is our witness to others of the power of God in our lives. We hang in there. We take the blows of life, but, by the power of God, we keep getting up off the canvas. Call it stubbornness, if you will, but it is a divine stubbornness that says, "*God has not created me to be a quitter. God has called me to be a conqueror with His help.*"

The writer of Hebrews uses the imagery of a race. You and I are running the marathon of life. Some of us may finish the race worn out, viewed as defeated by those of the world witnessing us. But with God's help we will reach the finish line of heaven one day. – If we will just hang in there--because a great cloud of witnesses by their example is cheering us on. God has recorded for you their record in His inspired Word that you might be inspired to be faithful to the point of death, and then we will win the glorious victory wreath crown of everlasting life, not because of who we are, but because of what we believe: namely, that God has redeemed us in His Son, given us wisdom unto salvation through the working of His Spirit, and will continue with us day by day to the finish line of life. God does not give up on us and we will not give up on God. And at the end, we will be victorious. Praise God! Let us all cheer Him in praise before His throne and in the witness of our lives to His glory! Amen!

Slide 6 -

Then let us put God's armor on, with all true Christians running
Our heavenly race and shunning the devil's wiles and cunning.

Amen, amen! This be done. So sing we, "Allelujah!" Amen! CW 192, v1b