

Young People's Forum (II.6)

Dear Young People,

We were discussing the different figures the Bible uses to describe the life of the people of God from the viewpoint of their calling in the world. They are called to live an antithetical life; but the Bible uses different metaphors to describe what that life is like.

We already discussed the fact that the people of God are strangers and pilgrims in the world; and we also took a look at the figure of a soldier who is called to fight under the banner of the cross and under the generalship of the Captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ.

In connection with this figure of a soldier, it is important to remember that this figure implies that this life is a constant battle. The world is not a playground; it is a battlefield. And the ground is strewn with casualties.

But there are two other figures which are used in Scripture. The one is that the life of the Christian is like running a race. There is a reference to this figure in Hebrews 12:1-3: "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, 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

To understand this figure, we must consider several things. In the first place, the text speaks of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. This cloud of witnesses includes all the saints in the OT who are described in Hebrews 11, a chapter in the Bible that is the roll-call of those who lived lives of faith.

You must think of a huge stadium or arena. At ground level is a race that is being run, a race that is said to be a race that we all must run with patience. The clouds of witnesses are all sitting in the grandstands surrounding the track on which we run. They are all shouting encouragement to us so that we do not weary of the race. Their shouts of encouragement are the deeds of faith they performed in their lives. They tell us of these deeds of faith to encourage us to run the race of faith ourselves and not to weary. They remind us of the difficulties of the race, but also of the help of Jesus. They tell us of the prize that is ours when we successfully finish the race.

In order to run that race, we have to do several things. The first is: "Lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us." If any of you have run in a race against other runners you will know that the runners wear as little clothes as possible and as light a pair of shoes as they can find. They know that every ounce they carry will only hinder them in the race. This text uses that figure. The sins that so easily beset us hinder us from running and make us tired sooner than we ought to be. Every sin makes it more difficult to run the race.

The second thing we must do to run the race is "Look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." The race we run as Christians is a race of faith. That is, it is a race

that is characterized by faith. If we want to know what is meant by this, then we need only look at the heroes of faith mentioned in chapter 11. (Read Hebrews 11 in your devotions today.) Their faith was an indestructible conviction that God's promises of salvation in Christ were sure. It was a faith that did not waver even when everything seemed as if these promises would never happen. Noah had never seen rain, but believed a flood would come. Abraham was 100 years old and childless and yet believed that somehow in some way God would give him a son. Rahab believed the Israelites would conquer Jericho even though it was a city with such thick walls that one could build a house on the top of them. Archaeologists say that it was possible to ride three chariots alongside of each other on the top of the walls.

But their faith was so strong that it determined what kind of a life they would live. Moses by faith abandoned the riches and splendor of Pharaoh's palace for the suffering of the Israelites who were Pharaoh's slaves. Abraham offered up Isaac on an altar even though Christ could come only if Isaac lived. That is the kind of race we are called to run as God's people.

It is well that, as we read Hebrews 11, we ask ourselves the question: Would we have done what these OT saints did? The only answer we are compelled to give is: No! Faith demanded too much of these OT saints; the price for running the race is too high. I cannot pay it.

That would be an honest answer. But! – and here is one of those great “But's” of Scripture: We can and will and do run this race. We know that we do not have the strength necessary of ourselves, and that we do not have the stamina to continue the race of faith in our own strength. Our help is in our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Author of our faith, but He is also the Finisher of our faith. He does for us and in us what we cannot do ourselves. And He will bring us successfully to the end of the race. And so we run, looking to Jesus That is, we run the race relying entirely on Him.

The text, in a surprising way, gives us a picture of Christ also running a race. He had a far more difficult race to run than we do. He endured the contradiction of sinners. Everyone was trying to stop Him from running the race. The devil himself tried to stop Him when our Lord was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. The devil even used Peter to try to stop Him from running the race. The disciples, when He needed them the most, fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane and all forsook Him and fled when the soldiers came. The scribes and Pharisees were constantly dogging his footsteps to find a wrong word Jesus spoke and a sin that Jesus committed. They opposed him with threats and tried to push Him off the cliff in Nazareth. They picked up stones to kill Him in the temple and said that He cast out devils because he was in league with Beelzebub, the prince of devils.

We must not think that it was easy for Jesus to resist all these efforts to stop Him. It was not! We are told in Hebrews 4:15, 16 that He experienced all the weaknesses that we experience and was tempted in all points in which we were tempted – although He never sinned. He triumphed over all those who stood in His way in the track he was running. He resisted all efforts to stop Him from running. He had no cloud of witnesses cheering Him on: only people trying to trip Him and make Him fall.

But the reason He ran the race to the end – even when He knew that the race included suffering and dying on the cross, was He saw that the end of the race was God’s right hand and the glory and blessedness of that high position in heaven.

He ran the race to earn for us the power to run the race. When we look in faith to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, then we receive His strength to run the race after Him. But to run it by faith means that we believe that the end of the race is the blessedness of heaven, where we shall be with Christ.

There are more references to the life of a Christian as a race. I think of I Corinthians 9:26, where the first part of the text says, “I therefore so run” It is interesting in this verse that the apostle Paul also compares the Christian life with a boxer, who does not simply swing his fists in the air, boxing against an imaginary opponent, but truly fights. Furthermore, in order to run or to box he keeps his body in subjection. That is, he trains his body, does nothing harmful to it, and is master of it. All this Paul does so that he may truly run the race, or fight in the boxing match.

One more reference is found in II Timothy 4:6-8. Paul is at the end of his life, about to be beheaded by Nero for his faith. He sums up his life as a race and a fight. “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course.” And he tells us that because he ran the race and fought a good fight, he knows he will receive “a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but to all them also that love his appearing.”

Those are the dramatic and powerful figures Scripture uses to describe the antithesis.

With warmest greetings and love in the Lord,

Prof