

“GO FOR THE GOLD (#1): THE RACE OF FAITH”

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

© 2024 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[Props Needed: (#1) Series Video Intro; (#2) Race-Starter Video/Audio]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 7-28-24]

--I--

1. **[WATCH "GO FOR THE GOLD" STAFF VIDEO ("Cake Olympics" -- 2:00)]**

A--Well, I guess I'm going to have to referee the staff for the next few weeks as they compete in their own version of "Cornerstone Olympics!"

B--Seriously, though, as most of us know, starting this past Friday and continuing through August 11, over 10,500 athletes from 206 countries are participating in 329 events of the Games of the 33rd Summer Olympiad in Paris, France.

C--These games, of course, only happen once every four years, during those 17 days they becomes the center of attention for much of the world.

D--And most of us also probably know that they originated in ancient Greece.

2. But what many people may not realize is that those ancient games were still taking place at the same time that our Christian Bible was being written, so that the writers of what we today call our New Testament would have been quite familiar with them.

A--Back then, they were known as the “*Panhellenic Games*,” ¹ and athletes from all across the Roman Empire would gather to compete in events that included what we today would call the long-jump, javelin, discus throw, marathon, track, wrestling, and (in what might have been the forerunner of NASCAR racing?) ...chariot races.

B--And as Paul and other NT authors were watching these events, it seems likely that he began thinking of parallels with Christian life and faith -- parallels that he later shared in some of his writings to Christians around the Empire. ²

3. So today, as we begin a new series called "Go for the Gold," we're using some of Paul's observations from the "Olympics" of *his* day and time to teach us a few "*lessons for the Christian Life*" (if you will) from the Summer Olympics of *our own* day and time.

--II--

4. Probably Paul's favorite *sports* metaphor in the Bible is that of him describing Christian faith and life as a *track race*, and we find a great example of it today's scripture from Hebrews 12:1-2 -- let me read you its words...

1 So then, with endurance let's also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, 2 and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer & perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, & sat down at the right side of God's throne."

5. Today, I want us to think about several parallels for today found in this passage:

A--For one, there's the "**race**" that Paul talks about "running": ...*LIFE itself*.

1--In *his* day, the "track" that racers would have run on was *not* like the smooth, paved, oval tracks found in today's stadiums.

2--Instead, the track races of the "Panhellenic Games" would have been run *outdoors* in the fields, forests, and hills of the surrounding countryside -- this would have been what we call "Cross-Country" Track today (like what our own Thomas Brandon & Hollis Anders are so good at!)

3--And that means that -- along with stretches of safe, easy running -- the "track" would have also contained twists, turns, obstacles, hurdles, and occasional potholes that runners might have occasionally fallen into.

4--And isn't that just like life itself?

(a) There are times when we go through long stretches where life is easy, and things are good and going well.

(b) But there are other times of challenge/difficulty: twists, turns, obstacles & hurdles along the way, & even potholes that we sometimes fall into.

(c) In Verse 1 of today's scripture, Paul calls these [CEB] "*extra baggage*" and "*the sin that trips us up*."

(d) He knew that being a follower of Jesus wasn't always easy, and doesn't exempt us from the challenges and traps of life, but that God can help us "*throw off*" and "*get rid of*" this "*extra baggage*" and "*sin*" so that we can "*run*" the race more swiftly.

B--For Paul, the "**athletes/competitors**" in this passage, of course, metaphors for we Christians, who are the "runners" of this "*Race of Faith*."

1--He's reminding his readers (and us) that as long as we're alive on earth, we're *not spectators* in the stands who're watch someone *else* run, and neither are we the race officials who referee the competition.

2--No. On earth, you and I are all fellow *competitors*, competing *not* individually against *each other*, but together *for and with* each other on God's team.

C--And that means that the **spectators** in the stands -- what today's scripture calls the [CEB] "*cloud of witnesses*" -- are a reference not only to God and the host of heaven,...

1--...But also our *own* ancestors in the faith who've gone to heaven ahead of us -- the ones who Paul refers to in 2 Timothy 4:7 as those who have "*fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.*"

(For me, that includes my grandparents GG and Meme Germano, Mom and Pop Smith, my parents-in-law Jim & Shirley Snowden, and others from my church who guided me in faith throughout my years: Dick & Ginny Zupp, 'Ma' Barton, Rev. Claude Smithmeir, and others)

2--In one the early Christian creeds (The Apostles' Creed), we refer to these as the "*communion of saints,*" and it means that not only are they watching us from heaven, but that they're also cheering us on as we run this "race" called life.

3--And here at Cornerstone UMC, it includes "saints" like... Carl Morris, Brenda Eaton, "Aaaavis" and Clyde Loper, Al Burtz, Betty Rhea, Shirley Davis, and a whole host of other disciples of Jesus who now rest from their earthly labors and live with God.

D--Of course, a prerequisite for any track race is a ***start line*** which must be crossed in order to initiate the "race" -- as Christians, we call this by different names:...

1--..."*Conversion*"; "*accepting Christ*"; "*giving our heart to Jesus*"; "*being born again*"; "*being saved*"; and many others. ³

2--But by whatever phrase we use, it means intentionally choosing to follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and *until* we do that, we're not really "running" a "race" at all but merely marking time *in place* at the *start* line, going nowhere.

E--But if there's a *start* line, then of course there also has to be a ***goal / finish line*** that all athletes strive to reach.

1--Again, we call it different names: "*death*"; "*heaven*"; "*paradise*" --in Philippians 4:14 Paul calls it "*the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*"

2--But by whatever name, it's a "*prize*" that's *different* from what's given at the Olympics, in that THIS "*prize*" is given not only to the *first* competitor to reach the goal, but to *ANY and ALL* who reach it -- making us *all* winners with God.

3--And today's scripture says that at that finish line is *Jesus*, who has blazed the way ahead and reached the goal *ahead* of us, and who's now there at the finish, cheering & urging us on -- in Vs. 2 Paul calls him "*faith's pioneer & perfecter.*"

--III--

6. So what does all this mean? What is Paul trying to say when he uses *sports* language to describe *spiritual* realities -- in describing the Christian life as a "*Race of Faith*"?

A--Well, as you've heard, there are (of course) *many individual* parallels we can make.

B--But for me, they all point to one *overarching* reminder not only for his readers 2000 years ago, but also for us today -- that is: that Christian faith and life is *not* a single, one-time event that we complete, check off our list, and move on from.

C--Instead, it's a *process / journey* of continual growth that we're called to seek after and experience for the *rest of our lives* -- the Bible calls this "*Sanctification*."

1--And it means that "being a Christian" or a "follower of Jesus" cannot be reduced simply to "believing the Bible," or "joining a church," or being baptized, or even accepting Christ at a revival (as important as those experiences can be).

2--No. If the Christian life is indeed a race to be run, and you and I are not simply spectators but fellow competitors, then we cannot simply cross the *start* line (e.g., by participating in some spiritual event or experience) and then think that that's all there is to the "race."

3--Instead, the race has to actually be *run* -- and that takes time, commitment, discipline, & perseverance (all things we're going to talk about in this series over the next few weeks).

7. So, the question I want to leave with each of us today is: **where are YOU in your journey with God** -- your "*Race of Faith*"?

A--Are you still at the start line, looking for someone to invite you onto the track? If so, then you need to know that the gun has gone off -- Jesus has already been inviting you to get started... so what are you waiting for?

B--Maybe some of you have crossed the start line -- you've given your heart and life to Jesus sometime in the past, or joined the church, or been baptized -- but you haven't ever really grown much in your faith *since* then.

1--You're hanging around the far side of the *start* line thinking you're done -- but you're not!

2--If so, then this series might just be God's invitation to you to DO something to get moving again towards the finish line: maybe to take "Disciple" Bible Study class or join a Sunday School class this Fall; to volunteer to help with our children or youth ministry, or help at Trinity Table or go on one of our mission trips to El Salvador; to begin tithing your income to God through the work of His church; or to share your faith; or something else.

C--And perhaps some of you have even tripped and fallen along the journey/race of faith for some reason: the death of a spouse or loved one; loss of a job; financial debt; someone in church offended you, or maybe you're bound up in an addiction.

1--And your fall has hurt so much that you don't even want to get back up.

2--Well, whatever caused it, know that if you'll let him, Jesus *will help* you get back up and finish the race -- cheered on not only by him, but by those who've *already finished* the race and are even now part of the host of heaven.

8. You see, *wherever* we are find ourselves in our "*Race of Faith*," Jesus wants to help us run and WIN it -- to help us reach the "*prize of the heavenly call of God*."

9. *Are you ready... to run?*

10. [PLAY VIDEO/AUDIO CLIP: "*Runners take your mark, get set...* (gunshot sound)"]

11. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

¹ "*Panhellenic*" was a word that referenced the original "*Hellenistic*" (i.e., Greek) origins of the games. "*Pan*," of course, essentially means "from across" (for example, as used in "*Pan-American*" = "*from across the Americas*"). So, "*Panhellenic*" originally referred to something that drew participants (in this case, athletes) "*from across Greece and/or from the various (ancient) Greek city-states*."

² For example, language found in many of the apostle Paul's letters reveals a familiarity with particular sports from these games, indicating that either he had been *told* a lot about them or (more likely) that he'd actually attended them in person. Consider, for instance, today's scripture Hebrews 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Philippians 3:12-16, and 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

³ Some Christians refer to this "start line" as "being saved." I do not use that term to refer to this because biblically, "being saved" is reference to the *entire* "race" of faith, *not* just crossing the *start* line.