

Keep Persevering—Looking unto Jesus... Hebrews 12:1,2.

In Victoria we see more COVID-19 restrictions.. But don't despair, be reminded.. *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.* Hebrews 12:1,2



I observed Kenyan runner, Collins Cheboi pace himself brilliantly to win the 1600 m race, starting 110m behind the front runner. Despite great odds against him he persevered and won! So we run the race set out before us... looking unto Jesus

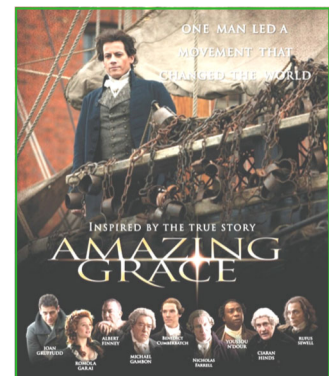
The writer of the Book of Hebrews uses the example of athletics to illustrate spiritual principles. Many of the Greeks and Romans were “sports mad” - not only for their physical well-being, but also for the honour of their towns and countries—sounds a little like many Australians!

- Now some advice from the Bible as we continue to live in our current circumstances—it is now 14 weeks since we met face to face in our local church. The “race” is looking more like a marathon, some restrictions continue, challenges remain. Of course for some COVID-19 is not the only difficulty. Some face long term debilitating health circumstances, others long term relationship difficulties eg.. bullying, emotional or physical distress or others extreme financial stress. Let's go to the Bible to be reminded of some principles to keep in mind as we run the marathon of life.. We need to pace ourselves well. .

1. Let us be _____ by the “cloud of witnesses” vs 1.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses vs 1.

- ◆ The “cloud of witnesses” is composed of faithful earlier followers of our Lord outlined in Hebrews 11 - sometimes called God's “hall of fame”. The word “witnesses” - μάρτυς—does not mean “spectators.” Our English word “martyr” comes directly from the Greek word translated “witness.” These people are not “witnessing” (as in “observing”) what we are doing; rather, they are bearing witness *to us* by their earlier example of a life lived for our Lord.
- ◆ Maybe you are really struggling with your faith in Jesus and even feel like giving up. The faithfulness of these people (Hebrews 11) and others more recently should be an encouragement to us. We do not struggle alone. Others have run the race and won and their witness should encourage us to run and win also—be faithful to the end .. *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course. I have kept the faith”* 2 Timothy 4:7
- ◆ On a flight to New Zealand I began reading “Amazing Grace” concerning the life of William Wilberforce (1739—1833) — his early life was all about privilege, hedonism and narcissism—all about pleasure and self - until he had a “great awakening” at the age of 26 when he became a follower of Jesus. Thus began a 45 *continued next page...*

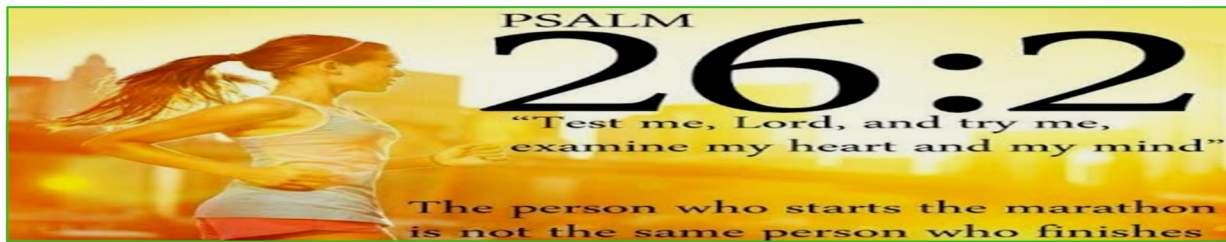


- ◆ year journey eventually leading to the passing of “abolishment of slavery” legislation. Now he is one of the “cloud of witnesses” . These are modern day “hero’s” of the faith whose example can encourage us.
- ◆ One of the best ways to develop endurance and encouragement is to get to know the godly men and women of the Old Testament who ran the race and won. If you are having problems with your family—read about Joseph. If you think your job is too big for you—study the life of Moses. If you are tempted to retaliate—see how David handled this problem.
- ◆ Our Lord has a special plan for each of our lives. When Wilberforce became a follower of Jesus he thought he should drop out of politics. Thankfully he talked to wise believers like John Newton (former slave trader who later wrote “Amazing Grace”) - who encouraged him to stay in politics—where he could impact a whole nation—indeed the world—for Jesus.
- ◆ It is good for us to talk with wise believers before big decisions are made in the journey of life.. Ultimately though it is our Lord we listen to, spend time praying together, individually, as couples, as families, as homegroups.. What passions/burden/gifts has God given you (S.H.A.P.E) - aspects to consider as we consider serving Jesus?

2. Let us throw off _____ that hinders us vs 1.

let us throw off everything that hinders ..vs 1.

- ◆ Long distance runners train hard over a long period of time to build endurance and strength. They sacrifice many things to be the best they can be. Athletes used to wear training weights to help them prepare for the events—they took off these weights for the race



- ◆ The writer of Hebrews is telling us to throw off the things that hinder us from running the race of the Christian life well. These can be good things like work (workaholic) , a leisure activity, relationships, and even ministry. Anything that becomes more important than Jesus in our lives is an idol. Matthew 6:33,34.. It is hindering us from running our race well. Coronavirus restrictions help remind us of the important things in life... especially relationships..
- ◆ What is hindering us or could hinder us from fully living out the Christian life? As someone has said, “The good is often the enemy of the best.” Let’s hold onto God’s best for our lives.
- ◆ Wilberforce in his early life partied, gambled and frittered life away, his study time was very minimal. He had deep regrets about this later. On becoming a follower of Jesus later he wrote in his diary—he would aim at being in bed by 11.00pm and rise at 6.00am as a daily schedule. He felt compelled to bring some discipline into his life. Where do I have to tighten my discipline? Do I eat too much? Is there too much time in front of a screen? What else maybe an encumbrance that is distracting me from my serving Jesus fully?
- ◆ In the current restrictions is there a new skill to gain? Ephesians 5:16... many have began backyard vegetable gardesns, even bought some hens for egg production!!

- ◆ Wilberforce began to feel two deep burdens—the abolishing of the slave trade & the “reformation of manners” - so he began his new life ministry

3. Let us throw off the _____ that entangles 2:2-3

let us throw off the sin that so easily entangles

- ◆ Remember the three-legged race. It’s when two people stand beside each other with the legs in the middle tied together. Then, they have to run to the finish line. It’s very challenging and teams invariably end up in a heap. That’s what sin does to us. It entangles us and trips us up. Galatians 6:7....
A man reaps what he sows... (King David example... the grass is greenest where you water it the most)...



- ◆ Obviously, we can sin by doing something we shouldn’t do. However, we can also sin when we do not do something that we ought to. (sin of omission) Getting rid of sin involves repentance – a 180 degree turn away from sin toward righteousness. We need God’s help. Scripture shows us the direction we need to go. The Holy Spirit helps us get there. We also need one another in the church to provide support, prayer, and admonishment.

Repent then and turn to God so that your sins maybe washed out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord Acts 3:19..

- ◆ Remember 1 John 1:9.. The best way of turning away from sin is to acknowledge it for a start..It is hard to give up sins—but God’s way is far better . Forgiveness is our greatest need. We can get that through Christ. This prepares the way for spiritual refreshment..
- ◆ Sin of unforgiveness— “I will never forgive....” - grows to bitterness. Bitterness imprisons us—Forgiveness sets us free...*Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin..if the Son sets you free you will be free indeed..* John 8:34-36.



- ◆ Sin of greed– “the love of money is the root of all evil”
- ◆ Lust—can consume our thinking (remember Philippians 4:8) - leads to destruction.
- ◆ Gossip—can lead to character assassination.. Ephesians 4:25 –32
- ◆ Addiction– gambling, drugs, alcohol... We are to be Holy Spirit controlled..
- ◆ Worry—(a “warning light that God is not first in my life” Warren).. Philippians 4:6..

Sin shrivels us up, emaciates our character, destroys relationships with loved ones and others—stops us fulfilling God’s plan for our lives—leads to emptiness—seeking to obey Jesus leads to ..John 10:10

4. Let us run with _____ vs 1

- ◆ The journey of life can be difficult... physical disabilities eg blindness, or being born without arms and legs. We can have financial stress, broken relationships or persecution ...
- ◆ In a sense, all of us as Christians are called to run the same race – to seek Jesus first and obey Him every day. Ephesians 2:10 .. *For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago...* . suggests that God has specific plans for each of us.

5. Let us fix our eyes on _____ vs 2..

- ◆ It was in “looking to Him” that we were saved— *to look* means “to trust.” When the dying Jews looked to the uplifted serpent, they were healed; and this is an illustration of our salvation through faith in Christ (Num. 21:4–9 ; John 3:14–16). “Looking unto Jesus” describes an *attitude* of faith and not just a single act. (Wiersbe)
- ◆ Jesus is the pioneer or author of our faith. Those who receive him become children of God (John 1:12). He is also the perfecter of our faith. In Philippians 1:6, we see Paul’s confidence in Jesus’ perfecting work. "... *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" Don’t fix our eyes on people—enjoy & grow relationships with people but our prime focus is Jesus—who will never let us down.
- ◆ As we remember Jesus and the race He ran for us, we are encouraged in our own race for Him. Jesus’ example of suffering spurs us on to run well even when running is hard. May we be like the Apostle Paul who could say in 2 Timothy 4:7-8:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.

Jo Shetler, a schoolgirl, with her dog, Laddie, loved exploring the hills and gullies of her parents 1000 acre farm... She had a dream .. “I’d dream about the house I would have some day: a big, beautiful farmhouse with a white fence. Cows would graze on the rolling hills surrounding it. Best of all, my house would be crowded with happy people. Occasionally in my dream, I’d leave my house and friends and go to the hospital where I worked as a nurse, like my mum”.. A great dream.. but it never came to reality because God had something so much greater for her... she became the sole source of truth to the Balangao people of the Philippines.. Thousands of the Balangao people became freed from fear, sacrifices and evil spirits when they came to know Jesus Christ.....because Jo Shetler and another translator translated the Bible into the Balangao language...

“Now people were literally standing around watching, waiting for the two women to die. (they, as new followers of Jesus defied the evil spirits) But nothing happened. By Sunday it was obvious to the Balangaos that the spirits couldn’t kill the women. That morning the Sunday Bible study exploded from 60 people to over 200 people. We took all the furniture out of the house and people sat shoulder to shoulder on the floor, filling the house. People were standing on the porch and in the doorways and peering through the windows - even the yard was full. The atmosphere was electric. I was riddled with questions the entire morning. They wanted to know.. “Who is this God that has more power than the spirits?” ... so many Balangao turned to Jesus... then they became missionaries to tribes nearby.. Thousands became believers because Jo Shetler obeyed Jesus...

As we run the race of the Christian life, we will encounter many challenges and opportunities. Let’s keep our eyes fixed on Jesus in 2020 and beyond. ..